THE RECKLESS LADY

PHILIP GIBBS

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Please Return

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By SIR PHILIP GIBBS

TEN YEARS AFTER:
A Reminder
THE RECKLESS LADY
HEIRS APPARENT
THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD
THE STREET OF ADVENTURE
WOUNDED SOULS
PEOPLE OF DESTINY
THE SOUL OF THE WAR
THE BATTLES OF THE SOMME
THE STRUGGLE IN FLANDERS
THE WAY TO VICTORY, *2 Vols.*
NOW IT CAN BE TOLD
MORE THAT MUST BE TOLD

THE RECKLESS LADY

BY

PHILIP GIBBS

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I

ANYBODY passing up the steep road which climbs the heights behind Monte Carlo to the terraced vineyards on the mountain-slopes could look over the low wall of the Villa Margherita, not far above the Hôtel des Anglais. Most passers-by did look over that wall because of the garden inside, full of flowers even in February, and because of the open verandah and a glimpse of a drawing-room with chintz-covered chairs, a rosewood piano, and, sometimes, a young girl playing there, or a middle-aged lady—her mother, beyond all doubt, and very beautiful—reading aloud to a boy who was often painting at an easel with his legs curled round a wooden stool.

The peasants trudging through the white dust of the winding road to their mountain-villages perched on high crags above the olive-groves liked that glimpse of English home-life over the wall of the Villa Margherita. They had known the family for four years, since the war. Always Madame Fleming came with her boy and girl—children at first, but now growing tall—as soon as the snow began to melt on the high peaks of the Alpes Maritimes and before the first tide of foreign visitors to Monte Carlo and Nice and all the pleasure towns of the Riviera. The peasants welcomed their return as the first promise of a good season when the price of oranges would go up in the market, and when the arrival of King Carnival would announce the full glory of all that wealth which flowed in a golden stream from foreign purses through the cities of pleasure and in smaller tributaries to the farmsteads of the countryside.

One of the peasants—a young fellow with a white donkey—leaned his arms on the low wall of the Villa Margherita, spat into the garden in a friendly way, and grinned at the young English girl on the verandah.

"Bon jour, mademoiselle!"

She was lying at full length on a wicker-chair with a book in her lap, but instead of reading she was looking over the orange-trees with their early harvest of golden fruit, and above the grey foliage of the olive-groves down the slopes, to where Monte Carlo shimmered white below. The sun flashed on the dome of the Casino and its white walls and surrounding palaces—the great hotels *de luxe* crowded already with the leisured folk of Europe. The sea was as blue as the sky, deeply and enchantingly blue. No noise of ragtime music from all the orchestras down there, no cry or *"Faites vos jeux—rien ne va plus"*—the sing-song of the gambling rooms—came up from that city of amusement to that villa by the side of the dusty road above it.

The girl turned her head at the sound of the peasant's "Good evening, miss," and answered him cheerily:

"Bon jour! Comment ca va?"

"Tres bien!"

The young peasant grinned at her again, and his black eyes roved over her face and figure with French appreciation of feminine beauty. They were milk-white, these English girls—the young ones—though the old ladies were mostly hideous, he thought. He would like to play in the Carnival with a girl like that, kiss her little white throat and push confetti down her neck. But of course that was impossible. She was one of the rich folk. Not for the likes of him. Well, there was a red-lipped wench waiting for him up in the village. Not too bad for a lad like himself. . . .

He gave his donkey a poke, called out again, *"Bon jour, mademoiselle!"* and went up the steep road, singing.

The girl sat up in the wicker-chair, yawned a little, and looked over to her brother, who had his legs twined round the wooden stool, with his easel on the edge of the verandah. He was painting the ruin of an old castle perched above the

ravine on the other side of the road, higher up. The sun glinted in his shock of reddish hair, and revealed just a faint touch of down on his upper lip—the first faint sign of a moustache and manhood.

"Stephen," said the girl, "I'm getting rather angry with the way people stare over our garden wall. It's like living in a glass house."

The boy answered carelessly.

"We've nothing to be ashamed of. At least, I haven't. Do you want to hide any guilty secret, old dear? You were an unconscionable time saying good-bye to the Italian Count last night."

The girl blushed rather vividly and ignored this challenge.

"I don't mind the peasants. They're simple and harmless. But I object to foreign visitors staring in here as though we were public property. There's one of them—an elderly man—who comes every day. He stares and stares."

"Likes the look of us," said the boy. "I'm not a bad-looking ass for my age, and you're a beauty, Sylvia, as well you know! Youth—beauty—sunshine! Why grudge him the treat?"

He lit a cigarette by striking the match on his flannel trousers—rather shabby old trousers—and scanned his work with half-closed eyes.

"Stephen!" said the girl in a startled way. "There he is again!"

She drew back into the verandah and half concealed herself behind a curtain of striped cotton.

A man stood outside the wall, looking into the garden and then into the verandah. He could not see the boy, Stephen, who was concealed behind a bit of trellis-work and a tall palm growing in a green tub. He was an elderly man, clean-shaven, and well dressed in a light suit of English-made cloth.

"Rather an old swell," thought Stephen, regarding him through the trellis-work. He had a handsome hawk-like face, rather ruddy, and keen blue eyes with little wrinkles about them. He might have been a successful actor, thought the boy, or a retired naval officer. English, certainly. It was

obvious that he was particularly interested in the Villa Margherita. He stood behind a clump of orange-trees, thinking, perhaps, that he could not be seen in that position, and stared at the little villa with its colour-washed walls and flat roof and painted decoration of clustered grapes and vine leaves above the windows. He stood there so long that the boy became impatient and walked out of the verandah to the garden gate.

"No," he said in a decided voice. "This villa is *not* to let, sir."

The elderly man was clearly startled by this sudden challenge. He turned sharply and for a moment looked as though he would walk away without a word. Then he recovered his self-possession and smiled, though he answered in a nervous, hesitating way.

"Excuse me. . . . A charming villa, anyhow. And a beautiful afternoon. I was just taking a walk. An uphill climb!"

He panted, as though exhausted by that uphill walk.

Stephen Fleming relented towards him. After all, if he admired the Villa Margherita, why shouldn't he look at it? And he appeared an amiable old fellow. Not so enormously old either—going fifty, perhaps—and certainly a gentleman.

"Won't you come in and have a bit of rest?" asked Stephen politely. "My sister would be glad to make a cup of tea for you. Wouldn't you, Sylvia?"

He turned and winked at his sister, who appeared from behind the curtain, after making a secret sign to her brother which he correctly interpreted as disapproval of his free-and-easy invitation.

The elderly man hesitated, smiled again, and looked undecided.

"Most kind of you! A cup of English tea, eh? That sounds good after that dusty walk. But I must be getting back, I'm afraid."

"I could get tea in a second," said Sylvia graciously.

Something in the man's appearance, his distinguished look and kindly eyes, had disarmed her suspicion. She liked the appearance of this elderly gentleman who looked like an

English aristocrat, as she had seen the type there in Monte Carlo and many foreign places where they had stayed a few weeks or a few months before wandering elsewhere in their queer nomad life.

"It's very tempting," said the man, "but I fear I'm intruding . . . a perfect stranger, eh?"

He laughed in a nervous and embarrassed way and kept glancing towards the verandah. Perhaps it was because of shyness that he asked a curious question.

"Are you alone this afternoon? You two?"

Stephen reassured him. He understood the man's fear of meeting a crowd of strangers. He felt that way himself at the prospect of a lot of chattering women such as one met at tea-time in some of the neighbouring villas.

"Only my sister and me," he said cheerily. "My mother is down at the Casino. Won't be back till six or seven."

"Ah," said the middle-aged gentleman. "But she might not like——"

The boy laughed at this hint of etiquette—this lack of proper introduction.

"Oh, we're an unconventional family and not English in our ways—not stuffy, I mean."

He spoke boyishly, and laughed at his awkward way of putting things.

"Not ashamed of being English, all the same," he said, by way of toning down the criticism of English ways, to an old buffer so obviously English.

"Well," said the stranger, "since you are so kind!"

He came in through the garden gate and took a chair on the verandah. Stephen noticed that his eyes followed Sylvia's movements as she brought out the tea-things. The old dog had an eye for beauty—that was clear. But he was observant in other ways. He was quick to see Stephen's easel.

"You go in for painting, I see."

He strolled over to the easel and put his head on one side.

"My word," he said, "that looks good! I shall say that was a good bit of work."

"Not too bad," said Stephen, with the true detachment of

an honest artist who knows when he has done a good thing. "It's coming rather well."

"I'd like to see some more of your work," said the middle-aged man, rather wistfully. "You have a real gift, my boy."

Stephen's "Glad you think so" was spoken carelessly, but he liked the praise, being like all artists who need appreciation as a counteraction to self-disparagement and moments of depression.

"I'm keen on portrait work," he said. "That's what I'm aiming at. Here's a thing I rather like."

He picked up a canvas leaning against the trellis-work, and propped it up by the tea-pot which Sylvia had placed on the table.

It was the portrait of a good-looking lady—the boy thought her beautiful—in a black dress, with a rose at her breast. She was smiling, as she did when the boy painted her, and made little jokes to keep her happy—the little private jokes of mother and son who were the best of comrades.

The middle-aged man looked at the portrait for quite a long time.

"Yes," he said presently, all the little wrinkles round his eyes puckered up. "A fine portrait! One would say the face of a good woman."

He spoke the words with a queer smile about his lips.

"It's my mother," said Stephen sharply. "But I'm asking you to look at it as a piece of painting."

He did not quite like that personal reference to his mother's "goodness." That had nothing to do with strangers.

"Yes," said the visitor. "Excellent as a painting, I should say. Not that I know much about art. Not in my line, you know. I've been a soldier all my life."

He glanced over at Sylvia and smiled.

"You must be very like your mother, if that portrait tells the truth."

"I should be glad to think so," said Sylvia, with admirable loyalty to her absent mother.

"And yet," said the visitor, "most girls take after their fathers, I'm told."

He stayed only a few minutes, drinking his tea quickly while he stood chatting. Once or twice he looked towards the garden-gate when footsteps passed—peasants trudging by with their donkeys and mules.

Presently he turned to Sylvia and thanked her, with old-fashioned courtesy.

"It has been a treat to me. Like an oasis in the desert to a lonely traveller. This garden at the end of a dusty road. The kindness of youth to old age!"

"It was nothing," said Sylvia, blushing a little. "Just a cup of tea!"

She held out her hand to him and he took it and raised it to his lips in the Italian way, to which she was used in Rome, and here, among her mother's friends.

He did not shake hands with Stephen, but put a hand on his shoulder.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you're famous one day," he said. "A great artist, eh? Well, good luck, anyhow!"

With that he turned and went out of the garden-gate and on the other side of the wall waved his hand before going down the steep road to Monte Carlo.

"Queer old bird!" said Stephen, turning to laugh at his sister when the visitor had disappeared. "I seem to have seen him before somewhere."

"Rather nice," answered Sylvia. "Old-fashioned and courteous and shy. I like shy men."

"Like me!" said Stephen, who, in his sister's company at least, was brazen-faced and impudent.

II

DOWN below in Monte Carlo there was a shrill fanfare of trumpets, which rose very clear to the hills.

"The heralds of old King Carnival!" cried Sylvia, rushing to the gate. The boy followed leisurely with his hands in his pockets. They could hear the noise of distant cheering and knew that the monstrous figure of fun which they had seen so often was being paraded in front of the Casino.

"Might as well go down and have a look at it," said Stephen. "Perhaps I'll make a sketch or two."

He was the first to see a figure whom he would have known a mile away.

"There's Mother! With one of her elderly cavaliers."

"Yes," said Sylvia, shading her eyes with her hands and calling a shrill "Coo-ee!"

She looked again, and gave an exclamation of surprise.

"I believe it's that Carey man. Mother's ancient flame. Do you remember, we saw him in Paris a year ago?"

"Rather an old bore," said Stephen, with the intolerance of youth.

"Oh, no. Rather an old dear," answered Sylvia, who was only intolerant of her own sex. "A pity he's as poor as a church mouse, like most of Mother's English friends, and all our miserable relations. If we had a nice rich uncle to take us about it might make up for the loss of a father."

"Mercenary little beast!" growled Stephen, good-humouredly. He rather agreed with her.

He gave a "Cheerio" to his mother and she waved her parasol gaily—the blue silk thing he had bought for her birthday after selling a sketch—the first money he had earned—to a little Italian Count who was "gone" on Sylvia; Count Goldoni, whom they had met in Rome.

"Hullo, you babes!" cried Mrs. Fleming. "Here's Mr. Carey come to see us. He's going through to Paris this evening. Isn't that too bad!"

Mr. Carey was a tall, thin man in a grey suit which hung loosely about him as though he had shrunk since it was first made. Stephen noticed that his shirt-cuffs were a little frayed and that one of his patent-leather boots had a crack across the toe. He carried a pair of bright yellow gloves, and silk handkerchief to match protruded from his breast-pocket. He had a gallant air, and swung a silver-knobbed stick in a jaunty way, though he walked stiffly as though he had a touch of gout in the knees. One of those old-fashioned Englishmen who are rather common in Florence and in the little villas at Fiesole.

"I missed you all in Rome," he said. "Thought you were still in the Piazza d'Espagna. Most annoying. But anyhow . . ."

He kissed Sylvia on both cheeks, and then gazed at her in wonderment and admiration.

"Good gracious, my dear! You've become a grown-up lady and most alarming."

"Quite harmless, Mr. Carey," said Sylvia in a reassuring way.

"I'm not so sure," laughed Mrs. Fleming. "You want watching, my beauty!"

"As for Stephen," said Mr. Carey, "why—God bless my soul! he looks old enough to be your father, Helen!"

"Not well said, Henry! I look young enough to be his sister, you mean!"

Mrs. Fleming's jolly, full-throated laugh rang out in the garden of the Villa Margherita.

"Perfectly true," said Mr. Carey, with a humorous smile which twisted his face. "You look ridiculously young, Helen, and just as beautiful as ever."

"I feel ridiculously young!" said Mrs. Fleming. "As for my beauty—it's wonderful what a little art will do!"

Mr. Carey shook his head. He couldn't accept that suggestion.

"No, no. Painting the lily! The English rose, rather. Quite absurd, Helen!"

Mrs. Fleming was glancing at the tea-things in the verandah.

"What's all that?" she asked. "Visitors?"

Sylvia explained.

"We've been playing the Good Samaritan to a stranger at the gate. An old English aristocrat—and rather nice. He looked fagged and Stephen asked him in—chiefly to show off his sketches, I expect."

"The woman with the serpent's tongue!" said Stephen, with brotherly contempt at this gibe.

Mrs. Fleming looked amused.

"You two gipsies! You'd ask a tramp to tea. Or the old devil himself, if he happened to look interesting."

"Why not?" asked Stephen. "I'd caricature the old ruffian and sell it to the newspapers."

Presently he made an excuse for sloping down to the town to see the arrival of King Carnival. Sylvia decided that her mother would like a quiet talk with Mr. Carey.

"That's all right," said Mrs. Fleming, in her tolerant, good-natured way. "Always forsaking your poor mother. Don't get into mischief—that's all I ask!"

She kissed her hand to them as they waved at the garden gate.

"A handsome couple," said Mr. Carey. "That Sylvia of yours is marvellous. Just like you, Helen, when I met you first, only not so beautiful. Not quite, I swear!"

Mrs. Fleming laughed.

"Tell me the news, Henry. How's England?"

She raised her arms—with a loud sigh of longing.

"Stuffy old England! How I want to see it again after all this foreign life. This exile!"

"Yes," said Mr. Carey. "Ten years away. Too long, my dear."

Mrs. Fleming said "London!" as though its name were paradise.

"I'd give all the beauty of Monte Carlo to see its dear dirtiness again. Oh, to hear the roar of 'buses up Piccadilly, to walk up Bond Street on a rainy day, to go shopping in the Brompton Road!"

"Why not?" asked Henry Carey, smiling at her through his monocle. "Nothing easier, Helen. A rather uncomfortable

journey of thirty-six hours—not too bad with a *wagon-lit*, which I can't afford—and there you are!"

"Yes, there I should be!" said Mrs. Fleming, as though he spoke of fairy-tales.

Henry Carey seemed to think there was no miracle needed.

"I'd go flat-hunting with pleasure. Somewhere in Kensington. Or the little streets off Knightsbridge. What about that?"

She laughed and shook her head.

"Tempting, but impossible, Henry. What about the Income Tax?"

He winced as though his shoe pinched.

"Lord, don't mention it! It has bled me white. I'm a poor man now, Helen. Devilish poor, my dear, like so many of your old friends who used to be pretty comfortable before the war."

"My old friends!" said Mrs. Fleming tenderly.

"The younger sons who are now middle-aged fathers—and deuced anxious!" said Henry Carey. "The young bucks of twenty years ago, now on half-pay, poor old buffers! Impecunious peers selling their estates. England's not the same place!"

"My old friends!" said Mrs. Fleming again, with a kind of sob, as though seeing dear ghosts.

Henry Carey rubbed his monocle on the yellow silk handkerchief.

"Yes, the old crowd of ours," he said. "The smart young fellows of Edward's reign who used to worship you, Helen, when I was the humblest of your lovers, as still I am, my dear."

Mrs. Fleming laid her hand on his for a moment.

"You've been loyal all through, Henry, through thick and thin, fair and foul."

"Your lover," he said. "Before your marriage, afterwards and now."

He laughed a little at old romantic memories.

"How many times did I propose to you before I sulked off to South Africa to get a bullet in my heart, with any luck,

which didn't happen? Every day of the week, I verily believe!"

"Not the only one," said Mrs. Fleming, blushing a little at her indiscretion. "There were half a dozen of you, all plaguing me. I must have been a fascinating minx, and eaten up with vanity. Well, I'm still vain."

"You ought to be," said Henry Carey in his simple way.

She asked after that half-dozen—her old lovers.

Billy Mostyn, killed in the Great War. Arthur Purcell—Bishop of Crossminster and impossible to believe. Philip Thorndyke—run over by a taxi-cab in Piccadilly on a dark night in war-time. One of the gayest of them all, and as handsome as a Greek god! Dick Lavington. Went down with his ship in the North Sea. Freddie Verney—died of wounds.

"Yes," said Henry Carey. "That's why one feels a bit lonely now in London. One misses the old faces. It's not the same at the Club."

However, he did not wish to exaggerate that side of things. The old set had not gone altogether. They could still talk of the good old times before the war, and deplore the social revolution. The privilege of middle-age and advancing senility!

"Do they ever talk of me?" asked Mrs. Fleming.

Henry Carey smiled at her. She had always made herself the centre of the universe.

"Now and then, Helen. Wonder why you haven't married again. Club gossip and all that."

"Yes," said Mrs. Fleming. "That's why I keep away from England. Old scandals crop up, be they buried ever so deep. Stephen and Sylvia would get to hear, as sure as fate."

"Don't they know?" asked Henry Carey, who seemed to be startled by her words.

"Nothing," said Mrs Fleming. "Nothing to make them ashamed of me."

Henry Carey stroked his lean jaw uneasily.

"One day it will be awkward for you," he said.

Mrs. Fleming nodded and said, "That's my tragedy."

There was a silence between them for a little while. It grew chilly in the garden and they moved into the verandah, and talked again of old friends and old times until the light faded outside and inside the room there was a pleasant dusk. Mrs. Fleming did not light the lamp. Henry Carey's cigarette glowed as he sat back in a deep chair, with his legs crossed and one hand on a bony knee.

"Any other news, Henry?" asked Mrs. Fleming, after further talk.

He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward in his chair, and tried to speak in a casual voice.

"I suppose you know Dick has come back from India?"

She drew a sharp breath, but answered calmly:

"I saw it in the papers. After that affair in the Punjab. Broken."

"Yes; a bad blow, after all his services to India. Unfair, too. He did his duty."

"In a way I'm sorry for him," said Mrs. Fleming.

Henry Carey seemed struck by her words.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Helen. It's generous—after the way he's treated you. Not well, in my opinion."

"Well enough," said Mrs. Fleming. "You know what happened, old friend."

Her long lashes veiled her eyes a moment.

"He ought to have made you free," said Henry Carey. "Most people think so."

"No," said Mrs. Fleming. "No more married life for me! As long as he left me the children. He was generous in that. Not that he wanted them! But he could have taken them."

Henry Carey agreed.

"Legally, yes. Perhaps even morally. It's a difficult problem."

"Not morally," said Mrs. Fleming. "I deny that. A mother's rights——"

Henry Carey jerked the ash off his cigarette.

"The law is devilish hard," he said. "In some cases it doesn't recognise a mother's rights, when they're forfeited—by certain things."

He asked a cautious, nervous question.

"I suppose it would break your heart to part with them now and again?"

Mrs. Fleming cried out sharply.

"Part with them? Henry! What do you mean?"

"The question comes up," he answered gravely. "It's going to be awkward."

He fumbled about in his breast-pocket and pulled out a letter.

"It's from your husband," he said. "Sent to your brother Jack, who asked me to bring it as I was passing this way. I know what's in it."

"What's in it?" asked Mrs. Fleming, coldly.

It seemed as though her heart stopped beating for a moment.

"Well," said Henry Carey. "He wants the children back, in a way. A share of them. It's damnable for you. Tragic! I hardly know what to advise, my dear, as an old friend, as your faithful and true old friend."

He spoke with emotion and coughed a little. He knew that this letter he had brought which he could hardly bring himself to give her, was a most cruel blow, smashing any little happiness she had built up.

Mrs. Fleming had raised her arm as though to ward off a blow. She had risen from her chair to take the letter, and she stumbled, and held on to the little mantelshelf painted in the Italian way with Cupids and flowers.

"No!" she cried. "No!"

Henry Carey looked at her anxiously. Could she bear the other thing he had to tell her?

"I'm afraid he means trouble," he said gently. "As a matter of fact, Helen, he has come out here. I saw his name in the list of visitors. Hôtel des Anglais. Quite close here. You ought to know."

Mrs. Fleming was breathing hard, like a creature at bay. She had a wild look in her eyes.

"Courage!" said Henry Carey in his gentle, knightly way.

It was then that Stephen and Sylvia came back from their

walk into the town to see the coming of King Carnival. She heard Sylvia's voice singing in Italian, and Stephen's call to the dog.

"Come here, old lad! Down, boy, down! You silly old devil!"

They came noisily through the verandah.

"Hullo, Mother!" said Stephen. "Lighting-up time! Hope we haven't been too long."

He saw Henry Carey in the dusk of the room which seemed darker coming from the open road.

"Still here, sir?"

Mrs. Fleming rumpled her son's hair.

"It sounds like a hint for him to go. Manners, Stephen! Manners, my son!"

She was wonderful in her recovery. Her laughter rang out in a very natural way. She put her arms round Sylvia's waist.

"Well, my dear, how much confetti have you got down your neck?"

"She asked for it," said Stephen. "Made eyes at the best-looking lads."

"Slanderer!" said Sylvia, and she flung a cushion at her brother's head, which he dodged and caught, threatening vengeance.

"Peace!" cried Mrs. Fleming. "And for goodness' sake mind my furniture!"

Henry Carey admired her pluck, that quick recovery, this laughing mask hiding the fear in her eyes. She had always been like that.

He stayed another hour, and then had to go for that train to Paris. There was no chance of a private talk again, except a word at parting. It was the word he liked best, the one that helped most in bad times.

"Courage!"

He turned at the gate to lift his hat, and saw her standing there between her son and daughter.

"Give my love to England!" she called out, merrily.

"What pluck!" he thought. "And what a tragedy!"

III

MRS. FLEMING saw her husband in the crowd watching the procession of King Carnival outside the Casino of Monte Carlo. She was not quite sure of him at first. Fifteen years made a difference to a man—and to a woman, dear God! But it was certainly that husband of hers, with his grave, handsome hatchet-face and bronzed skin, and the old grim look about the line of his mouth—smiling now but with contempt for this frivolity of life. His hair had grown grey—pepper-and-salt!—and his skin was more leathery, and the little wrinkles about his eyes had been carved deeper. Almost an old man, though with a straight back and keen, hawk-like eyes. Fifty-four last birthday she remembered. He was looking at her—or through her—and she felt herself become white and just a little faint—though it was quite ridiculous to feel like that! Sooner or later they had been bound to meet face to face, somewhere in a crowd like this, or in some restaurant in Paris, Florence—anywhere. He had come back from India three months ago. She had seen that in the papers. He had been broken over the Punjab affair—"the massacre," as the Liberal press called it—like General Dyer before him. Well, she didn't blame him for that; knowing India and the need of a strong hand. Dick would be strong all right, merciless when it was a question of what he thought was duty and justice, and the safety of the Empire and all that.

There he was, staring at her with his yellow-brown eyes through the dazzling sunlight which did not make him blink. Almost an old man, now! Did he recognise her? Or was he just wondering where he had seen her before? She lowered her sunshade so that he could not see her, and wondered why her hands felt so cold.

"What's the matter, Mother?" asked Stephen, her watchful son, who had lover's eyes for his mother.

"Rather hot and stuffy in this crowd, isn't it?" she asked. "Do you children want to see all this nonsense?"

She still called them children, though Stephen was eighteen last birthday and Sylvia twenty, so that she was appalled sometimes at her own age, though at forty-five she felt ridiculously young, as she had told Henry Carey, and just as amused with life as ever, when her luck was in.

"I'm not keen on it," said Stephen. "Let's go and get tea somewhere."

But Sylvia was enjoying herself, as usual. She was mounted on a wooden chair which the young man by her side—a young American named Edward Hillier—had hired for ten francs, and was looking over the heads of the crowd at the Carnival procession with its monstrous figures of fun, its giant ladies—ridiculous creatures!—its immense plaster cupids riding on dragons, its mediæval horsemen with green garlands, its heralds and knights, and all the long riot of dancing Pierrots, and Harlequins in comic masks, and short-skirted girls flinching confetti at the sightseers, to the blaring music of brass bands.

"Oh, Mother!" cried Sylvia. "Do have a look from this chair. It's priceless! Here comes old King Carnival and his courtiers. Did you ever see such a ridiculous old monster!"

She was the prettiest picture in the crowd, thought Mrs. Fleming, as the girl turned with laughing eyes and one hand on the shoulder of the young American who paid for her chair. She was in a white frock of Florentine lace which Mrs. Fleming had bought for her out of a successful little deal in foreign exchanges—Julius Kahn had been right about the fall in the franc!—and she had one of those absurd Tom Thumb parasols, which she waved excitedly above the heads of the crowd.

"My wild rose!" thought Mrs. Fleming. "My beauty who is beginning to know her own womanhood! How am I going to keep her safe? How am I going to hide her from her father?"

"Come on, Sylvia," said Stephen. "We've seen enough, and Mother is suffocated in this crowd."

"Oh, half an hour more!" cried Sylvia. "You two go and have tea, if you're so superior to life. Mr. Hillier will look after me—won't you?"

"I certainly will," said the American.

He turned to Mrs. Fleming with a smiling courtesy.

"If you will allow me, Mrs. Fleming! Your daughter will be quite safe in my care, and it's a pity to miss the fun."

He was a tall young man, rather grave and serious except when he smiled, and good-looking, with a thin clean-shaven face and grey self-confident eyes.

"Well, I'm not a spoil-sport," said Mrs. Fleming, laughing at his plea. "But Stephen had better stay with you. I shall make my way to the Casino and get out of this noise."

"Oh, lord!" said Stephen. "The Casino again, Mother? I believe that old place has put a spell on you. You're always there!"

His mother seemed amused at those words.

"One meets amusing people. I like to watch them at the tables. I get a thrill out of it, I confess—all that money won and lost."

"As long as you don't try the thrill yourself——" said Stephen suspiciously. "It's a rotten way of passing the time."

Mrs. Fleming laughed good-naturedly.

"A few francs now and then. Just to try one's luck. No harm in that, sonny! What are you young people doing this evening?"

It was Sylvia who explained the programme. Mr. Hillier had invited them to dinner at Mentone to meet his people. It was a gala night at the Amirautè. Great fun.

"My father and mother would much like to meet your son and daughter, Mrs. Fleming. I've told them of your kindness. If you would join us at short notice——"

Mrs. Fleming pleaded the need of a quiet evening.

"Another time I'd love it," she said graciously. "But if you'll take the children——"

Stephen seemed to shirk the arrangement.

"I hate to leave you alone, Mother. And anyhow I wanted to do a bit of work."

Sylvia jumped off the chair and seized Stephen's arm, to the amusement of the crowd standing around them and watching the procession.

"Bother your old paint-pot for once! And don't think Mother will fret without you. She'll be perfectly happy —won't you, Mother?—and youth has its rights."

"You're a gad-about," said Stephen. "Anything rather than stay at home."

Mrs. Fleming glanced at her son's face and saw her husband in it—her stern, censorious husband of ancient days, who stood within a few yards of her so that she was frightened to death, though she pretended not to see him. Stephen was distressingly like him sometimes, though seldom censorious with her. He thought her wonderful, the paragon of all virtues. One day, when he found out . . .

She felt rather cold, though she had complained of heat.

"It's your own selfish egotism," said Sylvia, who was never at a loss for argument. "Mother will be delighted to get rid of you once in a while. No woman can stand one man clinging to her all the time."

Stephen grinned.

"Oh, well, if you put it like that! But it's a warning to your future husband."

The American intervened, smiling at the boy and girl like an elder brother.

"I don't want to wreck a happy home-life. But my people would love to see you. If your mother is good enough to spare you."

He was very courteous and obliging, but keen too, as Mrs. Fleming saw, by his glance at Sylvia.

"What an argument about nothing at all!" she exclaimed. "Go and enjoy yourselves—you two—and don't be home late." She kissed her hand to them and turned away, lest they should see a ghost in her face. He was like a ghost come back to haunt her—that man in the crowd over there.

She was aware that the crowd about them had been listening to their conversation. She saw them smiling at Sylvia

with an admiration that was not unknown to the girl herself. The blare of bands in the Carnival procession broke out afresh as another car with its grotesque figures came round the gardens. Sylvia had mounted the chair again and was waving her parasol at a pasteboard giant drinking champagne out of a monstrous bucket. The young American was holding her arm to keep her steady. All the English visitors nearby were craning their necks to see the comic figure, as Mrs. Fleming slipped away from them.

IV

SHE felt a little sick and faint. Yes, that was the man to whom she once belonged. There had been a safe distance between them for nearly fifteen years—all the way to India. Now he was back. She had forgotten him, or pretended to. She had thrust him into the secret cupboard of her mind, never mentioned him to Stephen and Sylvia—wiped him out of life. Now the sight of him in that crowd, with the sun in his eyes, touched her with the cold remembrance of those things she had tried to forget, believed she had forgotten—the supreme folly of her life, the miserable past, the weakness for which she had paid a frightful price. Now it was all back again. The price had not been paid; he was asking for it.

She would be bound to meet him in Monte Carlo, not a big place, not a town in which it was easy to avoid unpleasant people. They would come face to face, more directly than in that crowd. What should she do then? Pretend not to see him? Stare straight into those hawk-like eyes as though they were a stranger's?

Yes, she was sick with fright, because of Stephen and Sylvia. She had read that letter which Henry had brought; that terrible letter which had kept her awake all night, in agony.

"I'm getting an old man . . . Helen's wickedness . . . I have a right to my children now . . . I'm glad that other man died for England's sake. It blots out his infamy a little. . . . Send me Helen's address. . . . My legal and moral right."

So he had written, as she remembered every word of it. The same self-righteous, moralising man! Her "wickedness"—yes, but not all her fault. He had driven her to it, because of his stern way, his devotion to duty, when she wanted companionship, gaiety, the fun of life; his utter lack of understanding that a pretty woman, a young wife in

an Indian hill-station, ought not to be left alone for six months at a stretch. The "other man"; what a poor, weak, treacherous thing! He had left her after six months for another woman; left her penniless with Stephen and Sylvia. His death in the war "for England's sake" had been the only decent thing in his life. Now Dick was back again, an old man almost, eager to get the son and daughter who owed nothing to him in affection or loyalty. Nothing! She had worked for them, struggled for them, earned every penny for them, except an occasional gift from her own relations, poor as church mice. She had given music lessons, French lessons, Italian lessons until she was sick of the drudgery, and found lately an easier way of getting money —as long as her luck held out. She had brought them up to be innocent and good, to love beauty and the gracious things of life. She had given them a good time, grudging no sacrifice to make them happy. And they adored her and thought her the most wonderful mother in the world. What did they owe to their father in all that? What right had he to come back now, after all these years, and whine for them? She would see herself dead before she yielded them up her genius, Stephen, her beautiful Sylvia!

Mrs. Fleming went to the English tea-shop in the rue de Monaco. A cup of tea might take away that faint feeling she had. Afterwards she would go to the Casino and try her luck for an hour or two. . . .

That was a secret she had to keep from Stephen and Sylvia —that wonderful luck of hers by which they had been living lately. She had had some very nasty knocks now and then. She had been driven almost to her last five francs, but mostly she had made good, winning heavily at times, just when her nerve was beginning to fail. A terrible strain on the nerves! The children little knew how hard it was sometimes to be jolly with them, to keep a laughing face, to enter into their spirit of fun, when her head was aching and her nerves jumping after that torture at the tables.

She had had to lie to them a little, and that was a pity. She had to sneak into the Casino while they were busy elsewhere; Stephen painting, Sylvia playing tennis. At night,

sometimes, she slipped down from the little villa they had above the town, while they were dancing at some hotel with a group of friends. Stephen hated leaving her alone, and was conscience-stricken if he went out too much, though sometimes she longed for him to leave her, so that she might find time to earn her living—and theirs, poor dears! Several times she had nearly been caught. Once Stephen had been scared because he had gone to fetch her from a hotel where she was supposed to be dining with some friends —the Harveys—when she was having a streak of bad luck in the Sporting Club. One of her bad nights, and not less because of the bewilderment in her boy's eyes—the startled doubt—when she told a little white lie to him. It was all very troublesome and nerve-racking, but necessary—for the children's sake. The only way of giving them their good time, and their chance in life. Lately she had been unlucky again—yesterday she had lost more than she cared to own to herself—but the luck would turn again, as it always did.

In the tea-shop there were some people she knew—an old Colonel Rattray and his wife, who bowed to her from one of the tables, and the old Vicomte de Tilques, who waved a dirty glove at her in a gallant way. She had met him in Biarritz and he was inclined to be amorous in a senile way and called her *"chère petite femme"* until she flared out at his insolence. At the other end of the shop was the Countess of Wandle who played every night in the Sporting Club, for small stakes, and was bad tempered when she lost. A fat old thing, with a habit of talking scandal about the beauties of King Edward's young days when she was one of them—though hard to believe now.

And opposite Mrs. Fleming, at the very next table, was the man who was her husband.

He must have come away from the crowd at the same time as herself and walked faster. It was his voice which startled her and made her wish to hide herself behind the little Japanese tea-pot. How well she remembered that stern way of ordering tea from the servants as though he were giving an order on the parade-ground.

"A pot of Indian tea, not too weak, please. And some buttered toast."

Ridiculous words to strike terror into a woman's soul! Mrs. Fleming was conscious of terror. He was bound to see her. Those hawk eyes of his were already roving about the room, looking for any familiar face. They stopped on her. Their eyes met. She felt the blood ebb from her face, leaving it cold. For a moment or two he sat very quiet, while she fumbled with a piece of cake, with her eyes on her plate. Then she was conscious that he had risen from his chair. She heard it slide on the polished boards. He was walking over to her with his steady tread.

"Helen," he said quietly. "May I have a word with you?"

She spoke in a low voice that sounded strange to her own ears.

"This is hardly the place, is it?"

"That's true," he said. "I'll wait for you outside, if I may. Don't let me hurry you, though. Finish your tea."

That was like him always in the old days. That self-control, that insistence on finishing tea first, or breakfast, or dinner—before another quarrel, or a domestic crisis. Like Francis Drake, he would have finished his game of bowls before attacking the Armada.

He countermanded his own tea and left the shop, leaving something for the waitress.

Mrs. Fleming wondered whether fifteen years had made her look as old as he did. He had changed a little in his manner, she thought. He was more gentle, in spite of that way in which he had ordered tea. He looked a little broken. She felt a pang of pity for him. Yes, he must be lonely. . . . And then she was conscious only of fright again. How would she ward off his demand to see the children, to take charge of them, to steal them from her? Never that! He was pacing up and down outside the shop. She could see his grey-clad figure, his felt hat. He was doing sentry-go! Mrs. Fleming had a wild thought of escaping through the back of the shop, but that was frustrated by a quick glance assuring her that the shop had no back. No way of escape!

She would have to face up to it—this awful interview. Perhaps the sooner the better, to get it over.

She paid her small bill, rose in a leisurely way, smiled in answer to the old Vicomte's bow—a wicked old man!—walked in her elegant way past the tea-tables. She had pride, and nerve, though inwardly she was quaking.

Outside, her husband raised his hat.

"Let's walk into the gardens," he said quietly. "There's sure to be a seat there."

"What do you want to say to me?" she asked, with a kind of anger in her voice.

He did not answer that question, but spoke again, as though he had not heard.

"I find this cold wind trying, in spite of the sunshine. Getting old, I suppose, and India makes one's blood thin."

They walked together, silently, towards the gardens, this man and woman who had once loved with passion. Yes, he had been passionate, and ardent, and romantic, in those early days, and she had clung to him. Twenty-one years since their wedding-day! Fifteen years since her flight from him. Now like yesterday.

"You've hardly changed," he said presently, and gave her a side glance.

She was conscious of a little colour flushing her face. It pleased her vanity—her ridiculous, incurable vanity!—to know that he did not see much change in her.

"I still feel young," she said. In spite of—everything."

Her husband sighed rather loudly, with something like a groan.

"I feel older than my years. India takes it out of a man, especially when his country rewards him for faithful service by base ingratitude. Dyer and I saved India. Everybody who knows India knows that. And those fools howled us down in Parliament, called us assassins, when we had saved the slaughter of white women, forced the Government to censure us—dismiss us from the service, by Heaven! Well, I shan't live to see the end of the British Empire. But it's coming."

Mrs. Fleming made a comical little grimace which he did

not see. With her queer sense of humour she was beginning to find a little comedy in this meeting, in spite of its tragedy. It was like that husband of hers to talk about the downfall of the British Empire after all those years. He had seen it coming twenty-one years ago! . . . Drat the British Empire!

She said, "Here's a seat."

For the life of her she could not have walked a yard further. This meeting had taken all the strength from her. And her heart was beating ridiculously.

She sat down on one of the white wooden seats under the palm-trees in the Casino gardens. Some of the Carnival folk passed in their masks and dominoes. One of them was blowing a squeaker through his pasteboard mask with its long nose. Another threw a handful of confetti at her as he passed.

"Life's not a Carnival," said her husband, with contempt. "It's mostly tragedy. Like yours and mine, Helen."

"Mostly mine," she answered. "You've been all right."

He poked the gravel path with his stick.

"I'm not going back into old history," he said. You needn't be afraid of that. Let the dead past bury its dead, with all its wickedness and weakness."

"The past comes back sometimes," said Mrs. Fleming bitterly. She resented this coming back of her own past, when she had buried it so deeply, with such infinite care.

That old Richard of hers—Dick, as she had called him—was still fiddling about in the gravel with the point of his stick. He seemed to be talking to himself rather than to her, thinking aloud, she supposed.

"At our time of life—mine, anyhow—we can only pray for strength to carry on and do our duty to the end."

"Duty!"

She spoke the word with a laugh, very scornful. How she had hated that word! He had always been using it in the old days as a reason for the most unpleasant things, as the unanswerable argument. "It's my duty, Helen. Don't you see that? . . . I hate leaving you alone so much. But I must do my duty. Don't you understand?"

No, she had not understood. She had refused to understand why her life should be spoilt for that mystic tyranny over her husband's soul. Duty! Fiddlesticks! What about a husband's duty to a pretty young wife, bored, lonely, homesick, restless, full of spirit?

He looked at her searchingly when she mocked at that word. It seemed to remind him of the old days.

"Yes, I remember!" he said. "You never liked the idea of duty. Perhaps I made a fetish of it. But I still believe in it as the guiding principle of life. Otherwise there's anarchy, and no law. Look at England—now! All these damned Socialists clamouring for rights. They never say a word about duties."

"I believe in tolerance," said Mrs. Fleming. "Tolerance, kindness, charity, pity."

It was very absurd that they should be talking abstract principles like this in these gardens of the Casino. It was utterly ridiculous, if one looked at it with a sense of humour. Unfortunately her sense of humour was feeling a little weak, submerged by a creepy-crawly feeling of fear. What did he want with her? Why had he waylaid her like this?

He was thinking over her words.

"Tolerance?" he asked. "I never believed in it much. One can't tolerate evil. That's weakness. But I agree about charity and kindness. I want to be kind, Helen. Looking back, I see that I was a little to blame—for what happened. Too hard, perhaps. Too hot-tempered. Too impatient with your love of pleasure. Unkind, sometimes. . . . Well, if it's any good to you, Helen, you have my forgiveness after all these years. For the sake of the children."

So it had come, as she knew that it must come. It was to get the children that he wished to forget and forgive. Never! Never!

"They've grown up," he said. "Stephen and Sylvia! I remember them as curly-headed babies, and rather a nuisance! Always crying with their ayah. Different now! Sylvia is charming. Almost a woman, and as beautiful as you were, Helen. And the boy is attractive. A fine fellow."

Mrs. Fleming stared at him in a startled, bewildered way.

"How do you know?" she asked. "Where did you see them?"

"I took tea with them," he answered with the smile of a man who has stolen a march on the enemy. "I didn't tell them who I was, though. Not quite fair before seeing you."

Mrs. Fleming gave a little cry of anguish which startled two old ladies strolling through the Casino gardens with their sun-shades up. They turned to look at her a moment.

"How dare you speak to them!" she asked fiercely. "How dare you! They're mine!"

"Mine too," said her husband quietly.

"No," she said. "I've brought them up, educated them, given them everything in life. For fifteen years you've ignored them utterly."

"For your sake, partly," said Colonel Fleming. "I didn't want to be cruel—in spite of everything. I was hard, as you say, but not cruel."

"You didn't want them," said Mrs. Fleming. "You lived your life in India and cared for nothing else."

"What else was there to care for," he asked, "after you had left me, Helen? You forget that I loved you, in my hard way. Hard men love most, perhaps! Anyhow, after you went there was only my duty. I gave my life to India. Before the war, during the war, after the war. For the Empire's sake. Now I'm back, unrewarded, broken and lonely. Damned lonely. That's why I want my boy and girl."

"They're mine!" said Mrs. Fleming, and there was passion in her voice.

"Mine too," said Colonel Fleming quietly again. "A share of them, Helen. That's all I ask; a share."

"No," said Mrs. Fleming. "No. You will want to steal them from me. You will tell them how wicked I was, how noble you were! Because you're lonely now, after your work in India—at a loose end—you think that you can come back like this and take them from me, after years of forgetfulness. You want a little companionship! How nice to have a son and daughter ready made! To comfort you in your old age! . . . You should have thought of that

before. Your forgiveness is too late, my friend. I don't want your forgiveness. You didn't give it when I asked for it, prayed for it, on bended knees, weeping, broken-hearted, afraid. You spoke of duty then, and that wonderful honour of yours! You cursed me and cast me out. Nothing would have happened if you had had a little pity in your heart—a little understanding. Do you remember that night in the Cromwell Road when you came home on leave? I remember! You went away, leaving me to that man, with the two little ones—rather a nuisance then! Always crying with their ayah! You went back to India. Duty to the Empire! A stern, righteous, wronged man! And I stayed with the children, working for them, with never a penny from you, nor from those rich relatives of yours, those narrow, mean, virtuous people of yours, so shocked because of my immorality!"

"That's not fair," said Colonel Fleming sharply. "I sent you money which you refused to take. I was willing to make a generous allowance. I have settled everything on the two children."

Mrs. Fleming ignored him and continued her passionate monologue.

"I've drudged for that boy and girl of mine, suffered for them, given them the best in my heart and soul. They think I'm wonderful—the best woman in the world. Do you think I'm going to let you rake up the past with them, spoil their ideal of me, take them over from me? No! They're what I've made them, by love. By love! They're all mine now. Every bit of them. Go away and leave them to me."

Colonel Fleming poked the path with his stick again, tapped one little pebble which had become loosened.

"I've a legal right," he said. "I should hate to use that argument—hardly fair!—but I've a legal right. They're my children. I want to know them. Morally, I've a right."

"None!" answered Mrs. Fleming, harshly.

"As for the past," said Colonel Fleming, "I suppose they know something about it already? Surely you've told them something? They're old enough to know."

"They're innocent," she answered. "I've kept them inno-

cent. They know only that we quarrelled, and parted. And they're on my side!"

She spoke the last words with a kind of triumph in her voice. It was her victory—this love of her children. They believed in her. They were on her side. He could not alter that.

"You ought to have told them," said the Colonel gloomily. "One day they'll find out. Bound to. Then they will think the worse of you. Truth is always best."

Mrs. Fleming became a little pale. He had touched upon the secret fear of her life, against which she had always fought. "One day they will find out." For years she had postponed that day when Stephen's eyes would lose their adoration of her, because of that finding out; when Sylvia's innocence of life would be smirched and spoilt by the knowledge of her mother's guilt. She had warned old friends, avoided people who had known her in India—except dear old Henry, who could be trusted to the death—kept away from England, built up a careful barrier of silence between the present and the past, laughed away the sudden startling childish questions of Stephen and Sylvia about her early days of marriage. "What sort of a man was our father?" "Why did you quarrel with him?" "Why doesn't he send you any money?" "Why don't you marry again, Mother?—you're young enough, and wonderfully beautiful!" For several years they hadn't worried about all that. She had kept them so busy with the present, so satisfied with the life she had made for them. But one day they were bound to find out—and that day had come near because of this man's apparition.

Colonel Fleming spoke again.

"I don't want to worry you, or hurry you. Think it out, Helen. Let me have the children for six months or so each year. I'd like to take them back to England with me."

Mrs. Fleming rose from the seat, and there was no colour in her face, her beautiful face into which laughter came so quickly, as a rule.

"I would rather die first," she said, hoarsely, and she put out her hands, as though warding off the vision of that part-

ing—for six months!—with the boy and girl who were all things in life to her.

"Think it over," said Colonel Fleming. "I beg of you."

But Mrs. Fleming walked away from him without an answer, leaving him standing there, poking the gravel, in the sunlight that shone through the tall palm-trees in the gardens of the Casino.

V

IT was Stephen who had introduced his sister to the American whom she had now monopolised. He had met the young man—he seemed oldish to Stephen—in the mountain village of Gourdon, near the Gorge des Loups, when sketching the old walls on a narrow ledge of rock with a sheer drop on either side. The American glanced up at him with friendly eyes, as though wanting to talk, and Stephen, sitting on the edge of a stone wall with his sketch-block, gave him a chance by saying, "Steep climb!" The American with rather a slow smile agreed that it was not altogether flat.

"Must have been a strong position in the old days," he remarked surveying the steep ravine dropping down to the terrace vineyards below. "No good to-day against high-angle fire. A few howitzers would blow it off the map."

Stephen was not much interested in that point of view. He preferred the jolly way it built up into a picture. And he liked to imagine the mediæval life in places like this, when some Italian Count, like Sylvia's little Goldoni—the country wasn't French in those days—lived in the castle up there, with his men-at-arms, and a troubadour or two, and ladies in horned head-dresses to whom they wrote sonnets in the style of Petrarch. There would have been a bit of fighting now and then with neighbouring nobles, but in a gallant, gentlemanly way. No high explosives and poison-gas.

Presently the American asked if he were English and laughed when he said, "More or less," explaining that he was English all right, but didn't know much about England, as he had lived abroad mostly.

"Well," said the American, "from what I hear, England isn't in good shape after the war. Unemployment, strikes, bad trade. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, the war made a bit of a mess," said Stephen.

The American was amused again.

"It certainly did! I've been helping to clear it up a little here and there. In the A.R.A."

"What's that?" asked Stephen, mystified.

"The American Relief Administration. Feeding the kiddies. Since the war we've helped to keep a good few million alive in Russia, Poland, and other places. It was a job worth doing. I'm glad I've had a hand in it."

"One doesn't see much effect of war in Monte Carlo," Stephen remarked, and that made the American laugh. He threw off rather a good phrase. "The play-ground of the profiteers," he said, with his rather slow-lighting smile. Then he added that he mustn't say too much about that as he was staying in the neighbourhood himself with his own people! Before walking off he handed Stephen a card and said, "Hope to see you again one day."

On the card was the name Mr. Edward P. Hillier, and the address, Grand Rapids, Mich., U.S.A., which Stephen thought sounded wild and romantic. He imagined Indians there, with canoes, in which they shot down roaring cataracts.

It was on the next afternoon that he and Sylvia had met the American in the crowd round the bandstand, and Sylvia was surprised at their greeting.

"Who's your serious-looking friend?" she had asked.

"An American. I met him up in the mountains. Rather a good sort. Spends his time feeding the starving poor of Europe."

Sylvia seemed a little excited by that description.

"Why not introduce me? As one of the starving poor, Stephen, I'd like to make his acquaintance."

Stephen had introduced them, and the American had said, "Charmed to meet you, Miss Fleming," with a smiling shyness which had won Sylvia's immediate approval. She had asked him up to the villa and introduced him to her mother as though he were an old and trusty friend, and after an anxious glance and a few words, Mrs. Fleming had decided in her good-humoured way—she never thwarted Sylvia's little fancies—that he was "a nice-minded man" and not at all dangerous. Now, after a week's friendship, Sylvia had

decided that the American was much more interesting than poor little Count Goldoni, and one of the most charming men it had been her good fortune to meet along the road of life. Curiously, as Stephen thought, the American—Mr. Edward P. Hillier, of Grand Rapids, Mich.—seemed equally taken with Sylvia. Her sense of humour seemed to appeal to him, and the gravity of his face was brightened considerably by the smile he gave every time she made one of her flippant little jests. Indeed there was a look of wonderment and admiration in his eyes, as though he thought Sylvia the most remarkable and attractive thing he had seen on his travels in Europe, though he must have been a good deal, thought Stephen, in one way and another, including kids like Sylvia. Possibly to an American her type of prettiness, and her free-and-easy way of speech, and the habit she had of singing like a bird just to show that she was enjoying herself, was somewhat of a novelty. Anyhow, he seemed vastly entertained, and eager to introduce her to his people.

They had an amusing evening with him at Mentone, though there were moments when Stephen was rather bored and thought it all rather silly. He was also slightly alarmed at the excitable behaviour of Sylvia, who not only flirted shamelessly with the Young American, who seemed to like it, thought Stephen, but also with his father, who was knocked edgewise by her audacity. Still no one could say that Sylvia was lacking in a sense of humour!

She was vastly excited by the drive from Monte Carlo along the Grande Corniche road which she induced the American to take in preference to the lower and safer road. He had given her a warning about it.

"It's a bit risky after dark, don't you think? Your mother might object."

"I like risk," was Sylvia's answer. "But of course if you're out for safety first——"

That was a challenge to an American who had driven from the Middle West to San Francisco. He accepted it as such with quiet amusement.

"My nerve's all right, in spite of the shattering effects of war and peace. I was thinking of yours."

"You needn't worry about mine," said Sylvia, with the self-assurance of modern maidenhood. "Show us a bit of speed. And long live the Stars and Stripes!"

He had shown a bit of speed, though Stephen noticed that he was cautious also, and slowed down at the dangerous curves, and was courteous in turning out his lights when another car approached.

Once he pointed to a gap in the low wall, and glanced sideways with a smile at Sylvia.

"See that hole? That's where a Rolls-Royce went through, a week ago. A thousand-foot drop. Worse than falling from a sky-scraper."

He was testing her nerve, in retaliation for her impudence.

She only laughed and squirmed round in the car to look at the lights of Monaco and Monte Carlo, thickly clustered below them, and behind, on the edge of the unruffled sea. Down the slopes the sharp edges of the palm-trees seemed to cut the sky-line blackly, and all about them was that half-light just before the coming of a Riviera night when the sky is still blue and the darkness translucent. The first stars were out, not so bright as all those gleaming lamps in the cities of pleasure.

"O Life! O Beauty!" cried Sylvia, and she sang a bit out of some Italian opera in a shrill soprano, ignoring Stephen's plea to give the birds a chance and not disturb the man at the wheel.

But the American had time to glance at things beyond his wheel and liked the look of them too.

"I'll be sorry to leave little old Europe! A week or two in London—the fog season, isn't it?—and then New York, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and work in my father's factory. Some difference! Well, I suppose a holiday can't last for ever. It's the first I've had since the war."

Sylvia was of opinion that life should be a continual holiday. She was endeavouring, rather successfully, with the help of an adorable mother and sunny spirit, to make it so. Also, why work in a factory—a factory of all things!—in a country like the United States?

Why not stay on the Riviera and grow oranges, or even lemons? What was life without beauty?

"I agree," said the American, smiling and turning to look at her.

"Why leave civilisation?" enquired Sylvia blandly. "It seems such a pity. Such a waste of life!"

"Well," said the American, good-humouredly, "from what I've seen of civilisation in Europe—Russia, Poland, Armenia—we're not so backward in the U.S.A."

"From what I've seen of American life in the movies," remarked Sylvia, "it seems to be made up of cattle-punchers, lovely vampires with big black eyes, and comic policemen. I prefer Monte Carlo. Forgive me, if I hurt your feelings, Mr. Hillier."

His feelings were not hurt. He saw the impudence in her eyes.

"I'd like to show you American civilisation at its best," he said. "You'd be surprised. It's pretty good in spots!"

"I'm European!" cried Sylvia. "Europe! . . . It's in the heart and soul of me. Paris. Rome. Florence. London!"

"A precious lot you know of London!" jeered Stephen from the back seat. "We haven't seen it for ten years."

"I remember it," said Sylvia. "It's waiting for me."

The American slowed down for another curve in that high road with a precipice on one side and the hills rising sheer on the other.

"We could give you a good time in New York," he said. "I'd like to see you down Fifth Avenue on a May morning. It would be nice for Fifth Avenue."

Sylvia seemed pleased with his way of putting things. After that they were silent most of the way, except for Sylvia singing her Italian stuff, snuggled back in the car, with her knees tucked up in a big rug, looking very happy with herself, while the cool breeze blew the songs from her lips and teased her hair.

Edward Hillier's father and mother were awaiting for them in the Amirauté restaurant just above the tramway at Mentone where it rounds the curve to the bay of Gavarni,

and below the gardens of the Grand Hotel. It was supposed to be a smart place and was certainly expensive, but Stephen saw at a glance that it was filled with the usual crowd of elderly ladies and grey-haired men who spend six weeks at Mentone each year to escape the east winds in England before the coming of spring, and to live economically in *pensions* and cheap hotels. He knew their type, and had made his mother and Sylvia scream with laughter at his caricatures of them, these austere-looking English ladies—astoundingly ugly some of them—who disregarded fashion and walked resolutely with big sticks up the winding mule-roads behind the coast to remote villages in the hills where they astonished the Italian-speaking peasants by their masculine appearance in short skirts and heavy boots.

Stephen had met them at incredible distances in those hill-top villages which he loved to draw. And occasionally he had been accosted by them in execrable French or worse Italian. Their husbands or their brothers were invariably retired colonels, generals, or admirals, who played golf all day and rejoined the ladies in dinner-jackets for table d'hote, when they deplored the wickedness of the working-class, the abominable weakness of the Government—"those damned politicians, sir!"—and seemed to think that England was doomed, slowly but surely.

To-night they were in festive mood, "living up to the spirit of the Carnival." It was a gala night at the Amirauté, and all the guests had been provided with paper caps and balloons and, worst of all, with squeakers, which they blew vigorously and untiringly, so that the din was terrific. It was into this clamour of ear-splitting squeakers above the noise of a jazz band and the shrill laughter of the elderly English ladies that Stephen and Sylvia entered with Edward Hillier.

"My father is living up to Europe," said young Hillier in a somewhat embarrassed way. "I hope you don't mind! The older generation must have a night out sometimes."

Mr. Hillier was a benevolent-looking gentleman with almost white hair and a fresh-complexioned face with very bright, humorous, twinkling eyes, behind tortoise-shell rims. He wore a paper crown, in a rakish way, and was blowing

a squeaker until he caught sight of his son's guests, and waved his hand to them.

"We've secured a table, Edward. Uncommonly near the band, worse luck! . . . And what do you call this dive? Talk about Bohemia and the Latin temperament! However, when in Rome, do as Rome does!"

He took Sylvia's hand and made a little bow over it.

"My son tells me he met you and your brother in Monte Carlo. And your beautiful mother. It's delightful to have you here to-night, and you can trust me to look after you in this den of iniquity."

Sylvia laughed and glanced round the room in search of iniquity. But she only saw the retired colonels and their ladies enjoying themselves a little boisterously.

"It seems to be a very respectable place," she said graciously. "And anyhow I'm old enough to take care of myself."

Mr. Hillier did not seem quite sure.

"Life in foreign countries seems to me highly dangerous," he said. "It scares me. Fortunately you have that tall young man brother of yours to look after you."

"Oh," said Sylvia, "I have to look after him. He's going to be an artist, and is cultivating temperament."

"Shut up, Sylvia!" said Stephen.

Mr. Hillier laughed loudly and shook hands heartily with Stephen.

"Glad to meet you, my lad. My ancestors came from Yorkshire. Good English stock. I'm proud of it."

He drew him closer and whispered to him:

"Say! She's a beauty, that little sister of yours! Fairy-like!"

Then he introduced his wife—Edward's mother. She was a white-haired lady with a shrewd humour in her eyes, as though she watched life with amusement and was not to be surprised by any of its absurdities. But she smiled at Stephen and Sylvia, in a motherly way.

"You'll find it rather noisy here. That band thinks it's playing jazz!"

It *was* noisy, and Stephen found it rather difficult to listen

to Mrs. Hillier, who talked to him while Sylvia danced with the younger Hillier once or twice before the arrival of the *hors d'œuvres* from waiters who scurried about with a lot of conversation but no immediate results.

She asked him if he had been in the war, and said "Lucky!" when he told her that he had been too young, and in Paris all that time, studying art.

"I lost my eldest," she said. "Edward's brother, and a noble young man. There's a golden star on a banner in our public hall—that's in Grand Rapids—and I've a grudge against the Germans. All the same, I'm for peace, my dear. At the Women's Club in Grand Rapids I do my best for the League of Nations—rather unpopular just now."

Stephen saw a little moisture in her eyes when she spoke about her dead son, and felt embarrassed and pitiful. He had had similar pangs of pity when he talked with other mothers, French and Italian and English, who had confided their grief to him. What a gruesome business it all had been! As a boy in Paris, Rome, Florence, and other cities—his mother was always roving!—he had been conscious in a childish way of the great drama of the war. He had followed it at first on a map, moving little flags, until trench warfare began, when the line never moved. He had seen the mobilisation in Paris, the weeping women, the silent men going so quietly. He had been in an air-raid or two, not frightened, rather pleasantly excited. Sylvia and he had stood out on the roof in their dressing-gowns, watching the Zeppelins like silver fishes in the searchlights. Sylvia had cried *"Magnifique; Superbe, ça!"* and he had called her a little silly and told her that she might be killed at any moment. His mother had been frightened. That was why they had left Paris and gone to Avignon for six months . . .

Only lately he had been thinking about the war and the meaning of it, and life generally. War, love, art. Those were the things that mattered most, it seemed, according to the books he read, Italian, French, English. Well, he knew a little about art—though not much as yet. The war? He couldn't make head or tail of it. He was all for France, though England seemed to be favouring the Germans.

Amazing that! And love? An utter mystery as far as he was concerned. It seemed to muck up people's lives. A kind of disease in a way, he supposed, like measles and other things. Probably he would have to go through it some day. Sylvia seemed to be experimenting already and finding it amusing.

He glanced over to her now, dancing with the young American, teaching him a new step, or something. She was certainly a graceful kid, even a brother must acknowledge that, and devilish pretty, as she jolly well knew. She was laughing up at Edward Hillier, who was half a head taller and ten years older. Funny that a man who had been through the war—he had mentioned that at Gourdon in the hills—should be so taken with a bit of a thing like Sylvia, hardly more than a schoolgirl, though very knowing for her age! He was blushing up to the tips of his ears and had a worshipful look. Very American and honest-looking, with rather good eyes—straight and friendly and simple.

"We're sorry for Europe," said Mrs. Hillier. "It's not pulling out as well as we hoped. Too much politics, I'm sure. That son of mine has been helping in the famine area ever since the war, and we're terribly proud of him! It's made him look older than he was at Harvard. Now we want him at home again. Only fair, I think. The girls are asking for him in Grand Rapids."

She looked over at her son and smiled, and then turned to Stephen again.

"I expect you're still at college. Oxford, isn't it? Have you thought what your work is going to be?"

Stephen shifted in his chair, uneasily, and laughed.

"Painting pictures, if I get the chance. Of course I don't expect people to buy them."

"Well," said Mrs. Hillier, in a tolerant way, "I daresay there's something in art. Edward says so, and I'm prepared to believe it. But to tell you the truth, these art galleries in Europe make me tired, my dear, though I shouldn't say so in a loud voice! Those Greek statues, and undressed young women! We don't hold with that kind of thing in Grand Rapids!"

"What happens in Grand Rapids?" asked Stephen.

Mrs. Hillier laughed quietly.

"Furniture mostly, and all the time. Mr. Hillier has the biggest factory in the United States—bedroom stuff, apartment sets, every kind of thing in that way."

She glanced round the restaurant of the Amirauté and laughed again at an idea that came to her.

"I wouldn't be surprised if these chairs and tables came from Grand Rapids. Mr. Hillier exports them everywhere."

Sylvia came back with Edward Hillier. She was holding his hand, and he looked as though he liked it but hoped people wouldn't notice.

"I'm going to be bold enough to ask you to dance with *me*, Miss Fleming," said the elder Mr. Hillier, giving his paper crown a more rakish tilt. "In the United States we don't leave it all to the flaming youth. Do we, mother?"

"You go ahead," said Mrs. Hillier. "I'm waiting for an invitation myself."

It was a hint to Stephen which he could hardly refuse, and he was surprised to find that Mrs. Hillier danced almost as well as his mother—though not as well as Sylvia, of course—in spite of her white hair. But he hoped that he would not be observed by the other people. It was rather absurd to be careering round with a lady old enough to be his grandmother, though she was rather amusing and not at all disagreeable.

The elder Mr. Hillier was dancing round with Sylvia like a two-year-old, looking absurd in his paper crown, but happy. He clapped his hands when the band stopped for a moment and then resumed with enthusiasm and winked as he passed Stephen and his wife, as though to say, "Life in the old dog yet!"

That, indeed, was inevitably what he did say when he came back, flushed and rather breathless, with Sylvia, who was cool and untired.

"She dances like a fairy," he remarked to Stephen. "And —gosh!—how all these people envy me! I'll say they do."

Certainly all the people smiled at Sylvia with admiring eyes, as Stephen noticed, not without a little pride in his

sister. But she was getting over-vain about herself. He would have to take the conceit out of her a bit.

When dinner came at last, Sylvia competed with the elder Mr. Hillier in the blowing of squeakers, and she won. Edward Hillier was plainly annoyed with his father, in a good-natured way, for monopolising her so much, but had his own back when dancing was resumed. Mrs. Hillier confided to Stephen that her husband was still a boy at heart. She liked him to keep young.

Stephen had the next dance with Sylvia. They danced together with the rhythm of long companionship, knowing each other's steps, doing the "twiddly bits," feeling the music. People turned their heads to watch them.

"You dance almost as well as our American friends," said Sylvia graciously. "Thanks to my tuition."

"Yes, but you don't make eyes at me in the same way," said Stephen.

"It's not the same thing—brother and sister," answered Sylvia blandly.

"No, so it seems. You had better be careful, young lady. I don't like the way you're beginning to carry on with menfolk—old or young."

"I can't help my good looks," said Sylvia calmly. "And I like to make them happy."

"Well, I warn you," said Stephen. "Don't say I didn't tell you."

At the end of the dance there was a professional exhibition. "Extremely professional!" said Sylvia, with an excited little laugh. Two young ladies appeared under the title of the "Undressed Dolls," and lived up to that name, to the amazement of all the old colonels and the scandal of their ladies.

"Outrageous!" said one elderly lady next to the Hilliers' table, but she put up her lorgnettes to see more perfectly.

Mrs. Hillier was quietly amused.

"We'll keep this quiet in Grand Rapids," she told her husband, who said "Gee!" and readjusted his tortoise-shell rims.

"Oh, it's nothing!" Sylvia assured her. "People who live abroad think nothing of that. Why should they, after all?

It's far more 'shocking'—for those who want to be shocked—at Trouville or Paris Plage in the bathing season."

"I agree," said Edward Hillier, but he looked embarrassed.

The elder Mr. Hillier registered surprise, and rebuked his son, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"So these are the foreign dives you frequent, Edward! Time you came home, young feller! We'll have to give you some moral uplift at the Rotary Club after all this European rough-stuff!"

He regarded the professional dancers with interest and sympathy.

"We needn't feel too sore about it. I daresay those two young ladies are quite respectable. Probably lead a nice quiet home life, with a dear old mother. It's very likely they're Russian princesses escaped from the Bolsheviks and earning a few dollars to keep themselves alive. I feel sorry for them. There's a lot of tragedy in Europe."

So the evening came to an end, because Stephen and Sylvia were taking the last tram back to Monte Carlo.

"Thank you so much for a delightful time," said Sylvia to the elder Mr. Hillier.

"It was our pleasure," said the old gentleman, with great courtesy. "And if ever you and your brother come to the United States we'd give you a bully time, and feel proud to have you stay with us. Wouldn't we, Mother?"

"That's certainly true," said Mrs. Hillier.

She held Stephen's hand a moment, and squeezed it.

"I hope you'll succeed with your art. It must be great to paint pictures, and I'm not such a Philistine as I pretended just now—though I do get tired of all those galleries!"

She kissed Sylvia's cheek and whispered a word or two with a motherly smile.

"You've won the heart of my men-folk. I'm jealous! Time I took them home."

"What's all that?" asked her son suspiciously, but with a smile for his mother which Stephen liked to see.

Sylvia gave him her hand.

"We've had a topping evening! When are you coming to Monte again?"

"To-morrow," he said promptly, "if there's a chance of seeing you."

There seemed to be a very good chance, judging from Sylvia's eyes, which held an invitation.

They were silent on the way home in the crawling tram. Sylvia slept a little, with her head against her brother's shoulder. There were some peasant-girls with their baskets, jabbering in their patois to two soldiers, and a lady and gentleman in evening dress looking tired and vexed with each other, and an old English colonel—certainly a colonel—who drummed with his fingers on a brown-paper parcel, and made impatient little noises in his throat, and glanced sideways at Sylvia now and then with a fatherly smile. Stephen stared out of the tram at the passing scene, painting imaginary little pictures—that bit of an old street with pierrot clothes hanging outside a lighted shop with a little low doorway—that view of Monaco in the moonlight, under the stars, so white and ghostly—that woman in evening dress standing on the steps of a hotel, with her face in darkness and one white arm touched by the lamplight. The world was full of pictures—every yard of it. His fingers itched to draw them or have a shot in colour. Too difficult! . . .

At the tramway's end they walked up the steep road to the Villa Margherita. Sylvia yawned, sang a little, danced a little.

"Priceless evening!" she said. "I like that American more and more. And what a sporting old father!"

They went quietly up the garden path, and Stephen was careful with the latch-key in case his mother was asleep. But she was not asleep. As he stole into the little hall, he saw her standing in the room to the left of it, their tiny dining-room. There was a lamp on the table and she was fumbling with her bag. On the table lay a few white "chips" which are used for money in the Casino at Monte Carlo. Stephen saw her face in a little gilt-framed mirror over the mantel-piece. For a moment it startled him, she looked so ill and white. She was staring strangely, with a queer look in her eyes—a look of fear.

"Mother!" said Stephen. "Aren't you well?"

She turned at once, with a laughing cry.

"Good heavens! I never heard you come in! Did you have a merry time?"

"Hilarious!" said Sylvia. "All the old ladies as gay as gay!"

Stephen put his arm round his mother's waist.

"Feeling all right? Nothing wrong?"

"Right as a trivet . . . but oh, so sleepy! I went down to the Sporting Club with old Lady Wandle. A wicked old woman, and so boring with tales of her youthful conquests!"

"Poisonous old cat!" said Stephen. "I should give her a miss, if I were you, Mother."

"Oh, it takes all sorts to make a world!"

He was relieved at the sound of her laughter. The lamplight had played a silly trick in the mirror. His mother was just the same as usual. Just as jolly and untiring. She insisted on making them some tea before going to bed. She had some funny stories to tell, in her comical way. But Stephen wondered why, before shutting her bedroom door, she put her arms round Sylvia and him and held them a moment longer, a little tighter, than usual in her embrace.

VI

STEPHEN spoke a word to Sylvia about his mother next morning. It was at breakfast-time, and the verandah window was open, with the sun streaming through, and a little breeze stirring and bringing in the scent of mimosa growing in golden clumps in the garden outside.

Sylvia was in a blue silk dressing-gown, with her dark hair in plaits over her shoulders and her bare feet in moccasin slippers. She had just received a telegram from Edward Hillier inviting them both to join him at the *Veglione,* or fancy-dress ball at the Hôtel de Paris that evening. He must have got up very early in the morning to send it, and, like most Americans, was extravagant in the number of words he used over the telegraph wires—quite a letter!

"Should be charmed and glad if you and your brother would be my guests at the fancy-dress ball Hôtel de Paris to-night stop My last night before going Paris and England stop Propose coming in pierrot dress for lack of original ideas stop Vastly disappointed if you cannot come stop Cable reply stop EDWARD HILLIER."

Sylvia was excited. She had been longing to wear her own fancy-dress which she had cajoled out of her mother, a gipsy thing in red and white silk, with a little velvet mask. Count Goldoni had invited her to a *bal masqué* at the Anglais the following night, so she would be able to put in two glorious dances which were much more amusing if one dressed up.

"I shan't come," said Stephen.

"Oh, yes, you will!" said Sylvia. "Mr. Hillier will probably introduce you to an American heiress. If you're nice to her it may provide for your future. You can paint her portrait—idealising her carefully—and she'll get her rich papa to buy it at an extravagant price. After that there

are other possibilities. But they can wait till you're grown up, my child."

"I'm worried about Mother," said Stephen. "She hasn't slept a wink all night. And she's been crying."

He had taken in his mother's breakfast—a habit of which he was jealous, so that he would never allow Sylvia to rob him of this right, or the old French servant who had been with them now almost as long as he could remember. He had seen at a glance that his mother had been crying, though she tried to hide it from him by pretending that she had a cold in her head.

Sylvia was not as distressed as she ought to have been by this news of her mother's health.

"Poor old Mumsey!" she said. "Probably read a sentimental novel last night. They upset her dreadfully. I never knew any one so emotional. If the hero doesn't marry the heroine she takes it as a personal tragedy. It's the romantic temperament, which you've inherited, Stephen. Heaven help you when you fall in love!"

"Heaven help the man who falls in love with you!" said Stephen. "You're heartless."

Sylvia jeered at him.

"You're always bad-tempered at breakfast-time. When I'm married I shall never let my husband breakfast with me. Men are impossible until they've been thawed out by hot coffee."

"How do you know that?" asked Stephen, marvelling at his sister's knowledge of life.

She laughed in a mysterious way.

"We women are born wise. It's intuition, and a heritage of guile. Besides, there's dear old Arnold Bennett, to say nothing of H. G. Wells. They seem to know."

"Mother is all nerves," said Stephen, avoiding the issue. "She can't bear the villa, and talks of chucking it and going back to Rome. Next week!"

"Not if I know it!" cried Sylvia, really distressed this time. "Why, we've only just settled down, and it's perfectly splendid here. And I'm going to have a wonderful time with

Count Goldoni, who is passionately in love with me and quite charming, though he does look like a baby Mussolini."

"Well, that's the idea," said Stephen. "She wants to go away from Monte Carlo, for some reason. Says it gets on her nerves."

"I must talk reason to her," said Sylvia calmly. "What you and Mother would do without my common sense I fail to imagine. Thank goodness I was born without the artistic temperament—all moods and emotions, up one day, down the next! I remain up, steadily, seeing the best of life, which is wonderful. The great, glad song!"

She trilled one of her absurd little songs from Italian opera, all shake and tremolo, like Tetrazzini in a love-scene.

Stephen groaned and said, "Not so early in the morning, old girl! It turns the cream sour."

He pushed away his coffee-cup and lit a cigarette, and stood staring out of the verandah. Suddenly he turned and spoke rather passionately.

"I'm fed up with this wandering life in foreign cities."

"What's the matter with it?" asked Sylvia. "What's wrong with Monte Carlo?"

"It doesn't lead anywhere. I can't see the use of it; and we're exiles from our own land. What do we know about England?"

"What do we want to know?" asked Sylvia, helping herself to some jam.

"We're becoming Continentalised," said Stephen. "Losing our own nationality, almost our own speech. Why, you speak French and Italian better than English. You've foreign ways of thought. The actual make-up of your mind is un-English. Why can't we go home and live with our own crowd, and get to know the inside of London as well as Paris, Rome, Florence and all the rest of it? I want to know my own people a bit."

Sylvia was surprised at this outburst. She did not agree with it.

"You wouldn't like them," she said. "They're so very stuffy. Shocked at the slightest thing! Look at all those old people who come out to the Riviera. Why, they haven't an

idea in their heads beyond golf and knitting and bridge and the poor old British Empire. What do they know about art, music, the charm of life? What books have they read, except Ethel M. Dell and Phillips Oppenheim? They stare if I mention Dostoevsky or Romain Rolland, or Paul Bourget, or—some others which perhaps are best not mentioned to respectable English ladies."

She smiled elusively at the thought of some of the books she had read. Even her mother, who was wonderfully broadminded, had objected to them, though they were perfectly harmless and very amusing.

"No," she said, "I'm afraid I should find England very dull, and there's a lamentable absence, they tell me, of charming young men. Mostly killed, poor dears. Still, I could do with a season in London. I wouldn't mind giving them a treat in Hyde Park."

"We're English," said Stephen, moodily. "We ought to know England. We ought to know our own relations. Why should they shun us as they do? Father's crowd can't be too bad. The old aristocracy all right."

"Poor as church mice," said Sylvia. "Shabby genteel. Decayed. Mouldy. Awful people, I imagine."

"We know nothing about them," answered Stephen, gloomily. "Mother always jibs when we ask about them."

"Well," said Sylvia, "you know what happened, old boy. Father treated Mother like a beast—although I suspect he has something to say on his side—and his relations thought he was a poor ill-treated fellow, and had a grudge against Mother. Very simple. Why bother about them?"

"There's more in it than that," said Stephen. "One day I'm going to find out. Anyhow, I want to have a look at England, and settle down there for a bit of work."

"I'm happy here," said Sylvia. "This sunshine pleases me. I need sunshine for my little body and soul. I like that yellow mimosa, though it smells a little strong at breakfast. I like orchestras, white houses, open-air cafés, interesting crowds, fancy-dress dances, and amusing men who—to tell the truth, Stephen dear!—are beginning to find me

rather attractive." She laughed merrily, and trilled another little song.

"You're getting as vain as a silly shop-girl!" said Stephen grumpily. "Look at you now, smirking into that looking-glass! If your nose happened to be set on straight, you might be decent-looking."

He thought her the prettiest girl in the world. They were comrades who would be miserable if parted for a day. He counted upon her to sew on his buttons, mend his shirts, encourage his artistic efforts, teach him to dance, discuss life, art and beauty with him, play dominoes on wet evenings. He knew her to be immeasurably superior to himself in all the graces. He even acknowledged in his own mind that she was less selfish than himself and quite generous in her admiration of his own gifts. But as a brother it was necessary to sit on her head sometimes, and that reference to her nose, which was not strictly classical, was always effective.

"Freckles!" she said. "Other people like my nose. Mr. Hillier sees no harm in it. Count Goldoni worships it."

"They ignore it," said Stephen. "They pretend not to notice it. And I'm going out for a walk to the hills."

"And I'm going to telegraph one little word to Mr. Hillier —'Charmed!'"

Stephen yielded against his will, sulkily, after further arguments. It would be rather mean not to go, as he secretly admitted. If he didn't go, Sylvia couldn't, and she had set her heart on wearing that fancy frock. All the same, it was beastly selfish—leaving their mother alone again.

"She's perfectly happy with her old frumps," said Sylvia. "Watching people lose their money in the jolly old Casino, where you and I cannot enter in, my child, because we have not yet escaped from the age of innocence. Wait till I'm twenty-one. I'll make the croupiers sit up and look astonished!"

She gave a little cry of mirth at the sight of a figure coming up the garden path. It was Count Goldoni, a little man of middle age, exquisitely dressed in a fawn-coloured suit with white spats. He was carrying a great bouquet of tulips and stood outside the verandah, bowing and smiling.

"Buon giorno, Signorina. Fa bello tempo, oggi!"

He kissed his hand to Sylvia, and taking a tulip from the bouquet, put it to his lips and threw it to her. She caught the flower and held it to her breast and cried "Poor little beauty!" in Italian. "What cruelty to be flung about so early in the morning."

"Don't you think you had better go and make yourself decent?" said Stephen, looking at her bare feet in the fur-lined moccasins.

"Englishman!" said Sylvia. Count Goldoni was ravished by Sylvia's plaits. He compared her with Beatrice and said he felt like Dante on the Ponte Vecchio at the first vision of that divine beauty, and Sylvia laughed because this chubby little Italian looked less like Dante than any man alive. He then saluted her as Juliet, and vowed that he was Romeo, and sang a little bit from the balcony scene, enchanted when Sylvia appeared on the verandah in her blue silk dressing-gown and sang the song of Juliet very prettily.

"Good heavens! what's all this?" cried a laughing voice.

It was Mrs. Fleming who came into the verandah, behind her daughter, to whose pig-tailed plaits she gave a little tug.

Count Goldoni greeted her with the same homage that he had given Sylvia, that he gave to any woman between sixteen and sixty. He kissed both her hands and called her lovely lady and beautiful creature, in his liquid Italian, and swore "per Bacco" that no mortal man could say which was mother and which daughter, as no one could tell the difference between two flowers of equal and adorable beauty.

On Mrs. Fleming's face there was no trace of that night of wakefulness, those tears which Stephen had seen, a little while ago, when he took breakfast to his mother, now dressed for the day and laughing at this scene on the verandah. She had that laughing mask ready, nearly always ready, for her children and her friends. Rather, perhaps, she had the habit of shutting up her own worries, her little nagging memories, in a secret cupboard, hiding the key even from herself, so that she could face life and her children with their own sense of humour, their own zest, their own youthfulness. She had indeed been the leader of their game in life, the

mirth-maker, always restless in her eagerness to keep them amused and happy, to avoid any dreariness or sadness. All through the war she had fought against the depression of the time for their sake, struggled to save them from any touch of its cold shadow of mortality. She had refused to let them see her weeping for so many friends who were killed, the lovers of her girlhood, her husband's comrades. She had made a jest of life, even then, so that their childhood should not be spoilt. "That gay Mrs. Fleming," people called her. "Always laughing, you know. Rather heartless, don't you think?"

She had overheard the "old cats," as Sylvia called them, talking like that. So now, after her night of wakefulness, an agony of tears—how should she escape from the man who claimed her children, how could she give him the slip again, and keep them safe?—the old habit reasserted itself and she came smiling to this verandah where Goldoni played Romeo to Sylvia's Juliet. But she was conscious that Stephen was watchful. He suspected something. Were her eyes still puffed? . . . He went out for his walk in the hills, where he chummed up to French peasants and innkeepers, and made passing friends with the people who watched him sketching. A queer, thoughtful, moody boy, with bursts of rowdiness and high spirits, and hours of depression which she did her best to shake off by any kind of nonsense.

Sylvia made a rendezvous for the afternoon with Count Goldoni—a harmless little man in spite of his gallantry and amorous speech—and Stephen stayed out to lunch, with some bread-and-cheese sandwiches and a couple of oranges stuffed into his pockets. She had a free day for her own plans. If luck favoured her, she might find that way of escape from her husband who had come back claiming what he should never have—a share of her dear ones. She would have to pay the rent of the villa—an awful sum!—settle up with the tradespeople—a mass of bills—get the tickets to Rome, arrange a thousand things in a hurry, and all expensive. Unless luck were on her side she would find herself trapped; and lately luck had been against her.

When the beautiful Mrs. Fleming made her way to the

Casino that afternoon, nodding in her bright way to people she knew, they did not guess that she was going to play against Fate for the lives of her children.

But one, at least, guessed that she was going to play for high stakes. It was the old Frenchman who had greeted her in the tea-shop, the old Vicomte with the dirty yellow gloves. He was sitting under the palm-trees of the Casino gardens with a young woman who had a dead-white face and vermilion lips.

"Regard that beautiful woman, Princess," he said in French. "She plays every day in the season. An English lady, and very charming. She won a lot of money last year, but I fancy her luck is out. Well, it's an amusing but expensive vice. I'm a victim, *ma chérie,* as you know."

He lifted his hat to Mrs. Fleming as she passed.

VII

STEPHEN sloped home from his day in the hills with his sketch-block under his arm and his cap in his pocket. His boots were powdered with the white dust of the roads and he had torn a rent in his shabby old trousers in scaling a rocky ledge to get a good perspective of a church tower above a cluster of brown roofs and a fortress wall. He had had a good day, made some rather jolly sketches, and increased his knowledge of life by listening to the gossip of some French peasants in a hill-top tavern where he had eaten his bread and cheese and oranges over a cup of hot coffee. They had talked about the war, and told frightful stories of trench fighting, with a wealth of gruesome detail and gusts of laughter and blasphemous words.

They had also prophesied another war in twenty years or so, when the *sales Boches* should be strong enough to come back again.

"And we shan't have the English with us next time," said one man. "France is without friends. The English are jealous of us. A nation of shopkeepers, with the souls of slugs! And those *sacrés* Americans with all the gold in the world——"

Stephen had defended the loyalty of England. There had been a great argument ending with handshakes all round and a bottle of cheap wine at Stephen's expense, so that he had felt the joy of manhood. Quite amusing, though it was a pity the French were always cursing England and suspecting treachery. A bee in their bonnets, kept buzzing by the French Press.

Stephen was home in time to see Sylvia standing at the garden gate with Count Goldoni, who had brought her back from the *thé dansant*. It was like Sylvia to dance all the afternoon without a thought of being tired for another dance in the evening. The little Italian was saying farewell with his usual ceremony. He kissed her hands for the third

time while Stephen walked from the curve of the road to the garden gate, a distance of fifty yards or so.

"A rivederla! Mille grazie! Un dopopranzo glorioso, bellissima donna!"

Sylvia answered in Italian, which she spoke perfectly, with a cascade of laughing, liquid words.

The little Italian, "my baby Mussolini," as Sylvia called him, desired to kiss her hands again, but she ran from him up the garden path, and as he bowed and waved his hat he bumped backwards into Stephen, and expressed his regret with hilarious apologies.

"Love makes me blind and deaf!" he declared. "Your most beautiful sister captivates my whole being. She is a sonnet by Petrarch. She is the Beatrice of the divine Dante. And she laughs at me as a fat little man! What a tragedy!"

He departed down the dusty road, much to the relief of Stephen, who was more English in his temperament than Sylvia and found this exuberance a little absurd.

He called out to his sister:

"Where's Mother?"

It was his mother who answered, from the garden gate.

"Hullo, you dusty tramp? Back again?"

He gave her his usual "Cheerio."

"Had a good day?" she asked.

"Not too bad, Mother. Did a sketch or two. They came rather well. Had tea yet?"

"No, but I'd like a cup. These hills! Poof!"

"You look tired," said Stephen.

He thought she looked more than tired as she came slowly up the garden path, holding her sunshade slantwise. He thought she looked ill, and there was a something in her eyes which he had only seen once before, and that last night, when they had come home from Mentone, and he had seen her standing at the little table before she heard him at the door.

"Just a little fagged," said Mrs. Fleming. "Where's Sylvia, and what has she been doing with baby Mussolini? I passed him on the road and hid behind my sunshade. My hands are too hot for any man to kiss."

"They wouldn't thwart Goldoni, hot or cold," said Ste-

phen, and he searched his mother's face again. She didn't look at all well.

So Sylvia thought too, when she came out of the verandah with a cry of "Greeting!" The laughter died out of her eyes for a moment.

"Hullo, Mother! Where's all your colour? Seen a ghost or anything?"

Mrs. Fleming put her hands up to her head with a comical groan.

"An aching noddle! Nothing to make a fuss about, sweet things. I suppose even a mother has a right to a sick-headache now and then, as a special privilege. A cup of tea, Sylvia, and I shall feel as right as a trivet. Get old Madeleine to make me some."

She asked Stephen about his dancing partner for the *Bal Masqué*, and he answered grumpily:

"I'm dining with the Harveys—worse luck. We're joining Sylvia later in the evening. That black-eyed Harvey girl—like dancing with a sack! I've a good mind to chuck it."

"No," said Mrs. Fleming. "Play the game, my dear. Sylvia can't be left alone without you."

Certainly she seemed better after tea. A little colour crept into her cheeks though there were dark lines under her eyes, and Stephen, watching her closely, as anxious as any lover with his sweetheart, saw that her hands, the beautiful, delicate hands he loved to draw, twitched in her lap, as though her nerves were all on edge. Presently she was laughing again, telling the latest gossip among her friends in Monte Carlo. Colonel Rivington had the gout, and was using awful language to his poor wife. Miss Brown was going to the Carnival Ball dressed as a peasant-girl. Much too old, poor dear, for that kind of thing. Ethel Byron was engaged to a man at Cannes—enormously rich, they said.

"Headache all right now?" asked Sylvia presently.

"Almost gone," said Mrs. Fleming cheerily, though presently, as Stephen noticed, she swallowed a little pillule when she thought he was not looking.

"Well, in that case," said Sylvia, light-heartedly, "if you're

absolutely certain you won't want me, Mother o' mine, I'll get into that Carnival frock. You remember we're going to the *Bal Masqué* with my American."

Mrs. Fleming pretended to look alarmed.

"It's getting serious, with that American. He's spending a lot of money on you, you minx!"

Sylvia smiled, as if she knew her own worth.

"He can well afford it, and we amuse each other. He has an agreeable sense of humour—for an American."

Mrs. Fleming took her daughter's hand and smacked it.

"You're a siren," she said. "Half a dozen sweethearts at the same time! Poor little Goldoni! I tremble at the thought of the risks you run!"

"I'm adventurous but not rash," answered Sylvia with sublime confidence.

"It's lucky you've a brother to look after your manners and morals," said Stephen. He spoke with his usual mockery to this elder sister, but at the back of his mind he was conscious of uneasiness, a vague sense of calamity at hand. His mother was hiding something from them. He was certain of it. Some frightening thing.

Sylvia was mildly amused.

"I wouldn't take *your* manners for a model, sulky Stephen! As for your morals . . ."

She gave a tug at his hair and ran into the house to put on her Carnival frock. It was a thing of red and white silk with a Pierrot cap and velvet mask. It had cost only a few hundred francs in a shop at Monte Carlo, and for some reason her mother had made a fuss about the price of it. Her precious mother was always like that—prodigal one day, skinflint the next, grudging them nothing one week, stingy and scraping a week later, and crying out against the least expense. Extraordinary and adorable mother!

"Mother," said Stephen, "I believe there's something on your mind. Something that's worrying you most abominably."

Mrs. Fleming laughed at him, but it was not quite her old true laugh, as Stephen knew, with his quick ear.

"Something on my mind? Why, yes, it's that ridiculous hat of mine. Look! That's better."

She took off her hat, a blue thing trimmed with forget-me-nots, which Stephen had chosen for her.

"Then you're ill," he said stubbornly. "Do you think I don't know that you're hiding something? It's as plain as a pikestaff."

"Fiddle-de-dee!" answered Mrs. Fleming. "You're getting morbid, Stephen. It's that novel you're reading by Romain Rolland!"

She laughed at him teasingly, but he saw that she was acting. Beneath her smile there was a haggard look.

There was the sound of a motor-horn hooting with a musical note up the road, followed by a swish of wheels outside the gate.

"All these sweethearts for Sylvia!" cried Mrs. Fleming, with mock excitement. "They come by every road and mule-path. Italian counts, American millionaires—I shall have to put a stop to it."

A Pierrot came up the path—a very elegant and serious Pierrot with silk clothes and lace ruffles and shiny shoes. He pulled off his white cap and stood, with a touch of self-consciousness, before Mrs. Fleming. It was Edward Hillier of Grand Rapids, Michigan, wherever that might be.

"Good evening, Mrs. Fleming. Excuse this ridiculous disguise. I've come to fetch Miss Sylvia. Rather early I'm afraid!"

"The early Pierrot catches the Columbine," laughed Mrs. Fleming.

The elegant Pierrot shifted on one foot—he certainly felt awkward in his costume—and gave an appreciative smile at this jest. Then the gravity of his face returned.

"I forgot to ask about your health. I'm sorry you were taken ill in the Casino this afternoon. I drove over from Mentone for an hour."

"It was nothing," said Mrs. Fleming quickly. "A sick headache for a moment."

"Yes, of course," said the young man. "Quite so."

He looked ill at ease, as though he had spoken indiscreet words.

"Have a cigarette," said Stephen, after a quick glance at his mother. Yes, she was trying to hide something from them. She had said nothing about being ill in the Casino. Yet she chatted gaily with the American, making him laugh by some reference to Prohibition. Then she explained the programme about Stephen. He was dining with friends and would join Sylvia later in the evening.

"Fine!" said the American.

Presently Sylvia came out in her Carnival frock and a little black mask beneath which her laughing mouth appeared.

"Good evening, Mr. Hillier. How's this for a Carnival night?"

"Perfectly wonderful!"

The tall young American took the girl's outstretched hand and bowed low, with a gallant sweep of his white cap.

"Take care of her!" said Mrs. Fleming. "It's a world of wickedness down there in Monte Carlo."

"I'll be her watch-dog," answered the American cheerfully. "No need to worry, Mrs. Fleming."

"Back before dawn!" cried Sylvia. "See you later, Stephen, with that black-eyed Harvey girl!"

"Possibly," answered Stephen grumpily. "If the mater's all right. Not otherwise."

Mrs. Fleming put her hands on her son's shoulders.

"What a fuss the boy makes about a little headache!"

She waved her hand to Sylvia and Mr. Hillier, junior.

"Have a good time."

The sun was going down behind the hills, and there was a purple twilight in the valley. Already the lights were twinkling in Monte Carlo which was white and glamourous round the curve of a darkening sea. The lamps along the promenade made a chain of stars, and there was a brilliant cluster about the Casino and its white dome.

"Hurry up for Fairyland!" cried Sylvia at the garden gate.

She sprang into the Citroen and in another moment the American Pierrot was at the wheel.

A pretty picture on the way to a Carnival night, as the car turned and dived down the steep road! A group of peasant boys and girls followed them, singing and shouting. They too were in Carnival dress, not of silk but of cheap cotton, gaudily coloured. The young men wore pasteboard masks with big noses. The girls pelted them with confetti and ran screeching from their pursuit.

"Jolly stuff to paint," said Stephen, with his artist's eye.

His mother was standing at the garden gate, looking down the road to the city of enchantment. Presently she shivered a little, and came towards the house again.

"It looks like fairyland to Sylvia," she said. "To me it looks like—something else. Think of all the vice there, Stephen, the tragedy, the tempting of souls . . . I wish we had never come to this villa. I want to get away from it."

"It's a very good little villa," said Stephen. "Nothing wrong with it."

He had put his arm round his mother's waist and led her indoors to the room beyond the verandah. Old Madeleine came in and lit two of the lamps and left them alone again.

The boy sat in a low chair in a corner of the room, while his mother played a tune on the rosewood piano, a gay little tune, until suddenly she slurred the notes and looked over at her son, and said, "A penny for your thoughts, Stephen!"

The boy leaned forward a little in his chair.

"Mother," he said, "are you ill, or frightened? There's a scared look in your eyes. What does it mean?"

Mrs. Fleming looked at the boy searchingly. These sudden questions seemed to take her breath away.

"What are your driving at, Stephen? What makes you think I'm scared?"

"I can see it in your eyes," said the boy. "You can't hide from me, Mother. What's the mystery of it all?"

"All what?" asked Mrs. Fleming. "What do you mean by mystery, my dear?"

She spoke with an attempt at gaiety, but her voice trembled.

The boy rose from his chair and walked up to the fireplace.

"There always *has* been a mystery," he said in a low voice. "I've been conscious of it since I was a kid. Why not tell me, Mother? I might help; and it's time I knew."

"Knew what?" asked Mrs. Fleming. "What do you want to know, my dearest dear?"

Again she spoke lightly, trying to fence with him, trying to ward off these questions for which she had been waiting—always. One day he was bound to ask. Now he was asking.

He spoke slowly, with his eyes upon her.

"I want to know how you get your money, Mother; and why sometimes we seem so rich and at other times get into debt so damnably. Why do we wander about, year after year, without any settled home, owing bills everywhere, though you spend so much on Sylvia and me—Sylvia's riding-lessons, her frocks, her dances, all this life of ours?"

Mrs. Fleming shirked his questions, and talked on, with a shrill little laugh, not like her usual voice of laughter.

"Do you blame me for my love of you? The way I spoil you two?"

The boy answered with emotion which he tried to check.

"We owe everything in the world to you, Mother. You've been wonderful. But, all the same, something's wrong. Dead wrong."

"In what way, my dear?" asked Mrs. Fleming. She still tried to avoid his questions. Even her eyes shirked his straight, thoughtful look.

"In all sorts of ways," said the boy. "Somehow I've known it for years, without saying anything. Decent people won't know us. Only strangers—like that American. When they come to know us better, they fade away—pretend not to see us when they meet us again."

"Snobs!" said Mrs. Fleming, carelessly. "Cads, Stephen."

No! The Lavingtons weren't snobs. Nor the Vincents. And they've no reason for snobbishness that I can see. Why did that Mivart girl sheer off at Trouville, and Captain Ellis

at Biarritz? What's wrong, Mother? And why have you been frightened lately?"

"What makes you think that?" she said. "After all my laughter, all my jokes?"

Stephen came over to his mother and looked into her eyes.

"It's no use pretending," he said. "I can read your face like a book, Mother. You're afraid of something to-night. Horribly afraid."

Mrs. Fleming tried to speak, but only her lips moved, and then, without speaking, she gave a queer kind of sob.

In a moment the boy was by her side, his arms round her.

"Tell me," he said. "I want to help."

She put her fingers through his hair—her favourite caress.

"The luck's against me, Stephen. That's why I'm scared a little."

"What luck?" he asked.

Mrs. Fleming answered with a strange irony.

"The God of Luck by which I've lived and tried to make you two happy—you two dears. You and Sylvia are the children of Luck. Didn't you guess?"

She spoke with a touch of hysteria, laughing, and crying a little, too.

"I don't understand," said Stephen, utterly mystified, and frightened too.

His mother pressed his head against her shoulder.

"How innocent you are, my Stephen! That's one up to me. It will be counted unto me for righteousness, your fresh, clean mind. But don't you know the ways of life in Monte Carlo, this beautiful hell? Why, the very roads are made out of profits of the gambling-tables. The gardens, the palaces, the bright lights down there are paid for by the little white chips that women like me lose at the tables, sometimes with their souls, dear sonny!"

"Oh, lord!" said the boy, with a kind of groan.

"You and Sylvia have lived on my luck at the tables, Stephen. That's how I've been keeping you lately, gambling in the Casinos of Europe, winning money at cards in Continental watering-places to pay for your studies, your clothes,

your fun in life, son o' mine. Ekeing out my miserable allowance from poor old Uncle Jack."

"Good God!" said Stephen, harshly.

"Hard work, Stephen," said his mother. "No fun for me, I can tell you, in those overheated rooms crowded with the worst people in the world, clawing at the chips, watching the beastly little ball roll round, working out their ridiculous systems, with no sound in the silence except the sing-song of the croupiers and the hot breathing of scraggy women—like myself!"

"Why in the name of goodness have you done it?" asked the boy, with anguish in his voice. "Surely——"

She ignored that question and went on explaining her way of life, its sordid details.

"I've had no system, Stephen. None at all! Just luck. I've betted on the number of my cloak-room ticket, on the day of the month, on any old figures on a tram-car or a taxi-cab or hotel bill. I've had amazing luck, mostly. Beat all their silly systems, sonny. Then we've had great times together, you and Sylvia and I. It was all for your sake, to give you a good and a decent chance. Sometimes I've been unlucky. Then I've had to stint and scrape, without enough ready money to pay the weekly bills. That's why we've had to leave so many places in a hurry. You'll remember those flittings, poor dear!"

"Leaving the bills unpaid?" asked Stephen, coldly.

"I've paid some of them afterwards, when the luck has turned again. It always did . . . That's why the decent people cut us. They don't like a woman who is known to earn her living that way, especially at cards in private hotels. That has been my life, Stephen, for two years or more. And that's why I'm a little scared to-night. For the last month I've had no luck at all, sonny, and unless it changes pretty quick it's going to be—unpleasant—for all of us. See?"

She glanced anxiously at her son to see how he took all this. All this revelation of the secrets she had hidden from him with infinite care, with many white lies, under a mask of gaiety.

He was taking it badly. It had made a physical change in him. He looked older, graver, and there was no colour in his face.

"Mother!" he said sharply. "In God's name, why have you played this rotten game with life? Didn't my father send you any money? Or his relatives? All those Fleming people?"

"Not a penny," said his mother. "I wouldn't take it from them. How could I touch their money, after their harshness, their cruelty, their snobbishness? I had a little pride of my own, though precious little else."

She spoke angrily, in remembrance of old feuds or insults. Even now pride leapt into her eyes at these memories.

"Whose fault was it?" asked the boy. "Why did you have to leave my father? Is that another secret, Mother?"

He spoke with a harsh irony, for the first time in his life, to this woman who was his mother, whom he had worshipped.

She paled under his searching eyes, and made a little tragic gesture. She would not tell him the truth, even now. Not all the truth. Not a word about the father who had come back.

"We needn't go into that, Stephen. Not to-night. And it's ancient history, anyhow. Fifteen years ago, after three years of quarrelling, tears, misery. Not all my fault, anyhow, though I was a little fool, up to the eyes in vanity and self-conceit. But not really bad, though your father thought so, drove me to—despair."

Stephen rose from his chair and strode about the room, with his hands thrust in his side-pockets.

"Stephen," said his mother, "you look like that father of yours in one of his black moods. Are you shocked at my wickedness?"

"It was a rotten game," said the boy. "Rotten all through. But it's been rough luck on you. I see that all right. I'm not blaming you. If only you had told me before! I might have tried to earn some money—as on office-boy, anything, to keep us honest."

Mrs. Fleming's voice broke a little.

"I played the game for your sake, my dear. Every time I won I thought, 'That will give my boy a better chance!' Every time I lost I thought, 'What will happen to Sylvia and Stephen? How can I save them from squalor and wretchedness, my genius Stephen, my exquisite Sylvia?' "

The boy spoke roughly again, impetuously.

"What's to be done *now?* Have you lost everything, more or less?"

"Rather more than less," his mother answered, with a pitiful laugh.

She rose from her chair and went to the windows and looked down at Monte Carlo with its clustered lights—that little city of enchantment, as it looked. She stood there by the open verandah. Presently she turned, and spoke in a voice of anguish.

"Sonny, things are looking rather bad, I'm afraid. I'm drowned in debt down there. Unless the luck turns again——"

She seemed on the edge of a breakdown, ready to weep, but rallied, by a painful effort of self-control, for the boy's sake.

"I think I had better go to bed, Stephen. I'm tired out. Perhaps things will look brighter in the morning."

She kissed him on the forehead and said, "Cheer up, my dear. There's bound to be a way out."

Stephen heard her bedroom door close, gently, and for a little while, standing there motionless as she had left him, listened to her moving about, opening the oak cupboard where she kept her dresses, shifting a chair on the polished boards before her dressing-table—dear familiar sounds which he had liked to hear while sitting up alone reading or drawing, after she had gone to bed, as an assurance of her presence near at hand, so close that he could answer her call if she needed him. To-night it was different. That conversation with his mother had closed down all that history of boyhood with its careless faith in established things—its happy-go-lucky belief in the truth of appearances—his mother's laughter, the sunshine of life, the good game of their wandering habits. His mother's laughter had been

but a mask to hide her anxieties, her fears, her nerve-racking adventures on the edge of a precipice over which ruin lay in wait for all of them. Beneath the sunshine of their life she must have been conscious always of black shadows creeping about her when luck was out—felt their cold touch and terror. Neither he nor Sylvia had guessed at her mode of life. They had taken everything for granted, with only vague wonderings, an occasional sense of uneasiness. Even now Sylvia knew nothing. She was down there in the city of Carnival, dancing with that American in fancy dress, in a laughing crowd with false noses and toy balloons; while he was aware of the tragedy of life which had been revealed to him by the mother upon whose essential and absolute goodness his faith in life had been built. Now something had broken in him. That faith, the ideal image of his mother's beauty, his adoration. Of course, he didn't blame her; that was absurd. She had done it all for his sake and Sylvia's. But he was sorry, frightfully sorry. Those debts! Those unpaid bills! They were worst of all. Somehow he must find work to pay those things off, and put things straight. Never again could he let his mother enter one of those damnable casinos with their wheels of luck. Not if they had to live in the direst misery. He would have to tell Sylvia; he would tell her to-night, Carnival or no Carnival. Like himself, she would have to face up to realities, the cold truth of things. And she had the pluck all right. She was dead straight, was Sylvia, and full of spirit.

The boy looked at his wrist-watch and went into his bedroom. He would have to hurry to dine with the Harveys and get his dancing partner. He had promised to go in fancy-dress. What mockery it was! He gave a queer harsh laugh as he took out his clothes—the costume of a Spanish troubadour. The splendour had gone out of it.

Well, there would have to be an end of all this nonsense and make-believe. No more sketching expeditions and mountain-climbing. He would have to go into an office for a weekly wage, and keep his mother honest, if he could.

She called to him from the next room.

"Are you going, Stephen?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Come and say good-night before you go."

He went to her room, moodily. She was already in bed, and as he bent to kiss her, she pulled his head down and held it in her arms.

"Sonny! Sonny!"

Something broke in him, and he cried a little like a small boy after the breaking of a priceless treasure.

"I'm not so wicked as you think," she said. "I'm not all bad, Stephen. Love me a little. Your poor old mother!"

"It's because I love you such a lot," he said, and then went from her to the door.

"You'll be all right when I'm gone?" he asked, trying to hide the tears in his eyes.

"Don't worry about me. Have a good time. Keep up the Carnival spirit, my dear!"

He laughed miserably.

"Curse the Carnival!" he said. "It's only make-believe. Life underneath is all rotten. . . . Well, I'll be back when Sylvia gets tired. Somewhere about two, I guess."

"Later, if you like," said Mrs. Fleming. "Let Sylvia have a good time—while it lasts. You won't wake me if you're quiet when you come in."

She kissed her hand to him as he went out of her room, looking older than the boy who had greeted her with a "Cheerio!" that afternoon.

VIII

MRS. FLEMING waited until she heard the front door close behind her son and listened to the scrunch of his footsteps down the gravel path, and then the click of the garden gate and his quick long stride outside, until the sound of it was faint and then lost round the bend of the road. Then she got out of bed again and dressed quickly with trembling fingers. She put on an evening gown, with a "diamond" bow in her hair. They had been real diamonds once, before she changed them into this sham and poured the price of the others—her husband's wedding gift—on to the green cloth in the Casino at Aix-les-Bains. She had had a run of luck. She had won enough to pay some of her debts and Sylvia's school-bills. That was before her luck ran out. Well, it must change again some time. Unless it changed to-night she would be broken. Down and out! It was her last chance. Only a few pounds lay between her and the finish of things.

She had staked heavily in the desperate hope of eluding her husband. Now she was in a worse hole. Caught—round the neck.

"For the children's sake!"

She prayed a little, aloud, in that bedroom.

"O God, give me this last bit of luck! If only I win to-night I'll never play again. Never as long as I live, if I can scrape out of this unholy mess and keep my children. Dear God! be kind to a poor, weak wretch! This once—this very last time!"

The woman went down on her knees to the God of Luck whom she had worshipped "for her children's sake," as she had said, in self-excuse, and perhaps in that moment the God of Pity heard and was pitiful.

She swayed a little as she stood up, and at the sight of her white face in the mirror above the dressing-table she took some rouge from a pot and touched her cheeks. For

a moment she stood looking at the image of herself, with her long white arms glowing in the candlelight and the false diamonds shining in her hair.

"I'm getting like the others," she said. "Those ghastly old women at the tables!"

She opened a drawer in her dressing-table and grabbed at a little packet of those white "chips" which are exchanged for money in the gambling-rooms of Monte Carlo. There were ten of them, as she counted with nervous fingers.

She put a fur cloak over her shoulders, pulled its hood over her hair, and blew out the candles in her bedroom. It was by the light of the moon that she stole out of the Villa Margherita, and ran down the steep road to Monte Carlo, ran fast, as a woman in a desperate hurry.

Some boys and girls in fancy costumes were coming up the other way, tired after the Carnival procession, but still singing, with linked arms. The moonlight made them look fantastic in their false noses and velvet masks. They stared back at the woman in the white fur cloak, running past them, alone. One of the boys laughed, and said some ribald thing, and the girls screeched in their high, mirthful voices.

Mrs. Fleming did not run all the way. At the beginning of the houses in Monte Carlo she walked slowly, with the hood about her face. She recovered her breath by standing a little under the palm-trees in the gardens of the Casino. Lovers were about, whispering, kissing, in the shadowland that lay beyond the glare of the electric lights.

She looked quite calm, perfectly serene with expressionless eyes and tight lips, as she gave her cloak to the women attendants in the cloak-room of the Casino. One of the women smiled at her and spoke a few words of French.

"Bonne chance, madame!"

It was a wish of good luck to a regular visitor who had been losing heavily, as the woman knew—from a croupier friend.

It was the crowded hour, on a night of Carnival; after the gala dinners in the great hotels. It was difficult to move through the rooms, owing to the press of people. There

were rows three deep round the tables, and a confused murmur of voices in many languages—Italian, French, Russian, German, English. It was English which predominated in every room.

"Frightfully hot here!"

"Look at that appalling female!"

"She might wear a few more clothes!"

"Those old ladies ought to be knitting at their firesides. Old enough to know better!"

The old ladies and their white-headed husbands had slipped over from Mentone, Cannes, the villas on the outskirts of Monte Carlo, the less luxurious hotels which cater for retired colonels and maiden ladies who let their flats in London for a season on the Riviera, where they live cheaply on the French exchange. They were risking a few francs—twenty—fifty—on the wheel of fortune. If they lost there was no harm done. If they won it would mean a good dinner or two at the gayest restaurants, and a present to the youngsters at home. There were other people to whom these gaming-rooms meant nothing more than a little "flutter," an expensive thrill, an amusing touch of melodrama. There were young English girls, tall and fair and fresh, untouched by the stale atmosphere and evil spirit of this place, and American visitors who had come to see European life at its best and worst, and young ex-officers of the Great War, some of them with an empty sleeve, or a stiff leg, escaping from the boredom of peace, without much purpose in life, and restless. Mrs. Fleming made her way through these amateurs, these casual worshippers at the shrine of luck. She was one of the professionals. One of the slaves of luck—its bondwoman, tied to the wheel. The others knew her as one of them. In the *salle privée* where the stakes were highest, an old man made way for her next to the croupier. He was an old vulture with bald head and bagged eyes and beak-like nose over a pendulous underlip. He blinked at her and whispered a word or two.

"My little system fails to work to-night, dear lady. Dead against me! Try *treize, en plein.* It's bewitched this evening."

They had met at the same table in Biarritz, Trouville, Evian les Bains. He was a dissolute old *roué*, famous in scandalous history forty years before, a dirty old wreck hardly human in vicious senility. The croupier shifted his chair a little for Mrs. Fleming to take her place, and said "Good evening, madame," while he raked in a pile of chips mostly belonging to an old woman with an auburn wig and pencilled eyebrows and enamelled face, whose thin lips had a fixed smile whether she won or lost. Round the table, utterly silent, were foreign-looking men with bald heads and blue chins and hard mouths and fish-like eyes. Impossible to guess their nationality, or what thoughts, emotions, sensibilities lay hidden behind the human masks. They made notes in little pocket-books, recording the way the figures ran, putting to the test some theory of luck, and its mysterious laws. Among them, silent also, except for the sound of their breathing, sat women in evening gowns, with bare arms and backs, fair fleshy women of uncertain age, and thin, dark, moody-eyed women, with rouged cheeks and painted lips. Mrs. Fleming knew them all—these devotees of luck. She knew their secret histories, their hidden tragedies, the abominations of some of them, the generous recklessness, the good-nature, the smiling immorality of others. It was easy to know. They told these things frankly, boringly, interminably, in hotel lounges and the corners of tea-rooms. Now and then one of them disappeared, broken on the wheel of luck.

"Poor dear Mrs. Venables! You remember her? The one who was with the Polish banker at Biarritz. Had the most wicked luck last year. Lost thousands! Well, she had pluck, I will say that. I shouldn't care to choose that way of escape. So painful and unpleasant!"

Mrs. Fleming had avoided these women as much as possible, kept them away from Stephen and Sylvia—especially Sylvia—and tried to prevent her own soul from being sullied by their evil whisperings. They hated her for that, could not understand her pretence of virtue. She was one of them all right, although she pretended to be so good, and kept so fresh, and lived a dull, respectable life

with her boy and girl, just as if she were a middle-class mother!

Mrs. Fleming did not glance at them. She changed her ready money—her last—for another bundle of chips. The croupier handed them out as carelessly as usual, not knowing that this was her last throw with Fate—not caring, anyhow. He gaped behind his hand. A boring, tedious, exacting job! Now, a nice little hotel, somewhere on the edge of Cannes. . . .

The woman by his side had won. He raked over a pile of chips from the central squares. She was doubling her stakes. He gaped again. Five more hours of this awful tedium! . . . He could get his *chef* from the Hôtel des Anglais. There would be no profits the first year. Too much to expect. . . .

The woman by his side had won again. He raked over another pile.

She doubled her stake again.

The croupier wished she would not breathe so hard. It was Mrs. Fleming. Rather a handsome woman, he thought, and good-natured. She generally had a little joke with him. Asked after his wife and children as if she really wanted to know. More human, less selfish, than most of these people. . . .

She won again.

The room was crowding up. There was a double row of onlookers behind the table. The croupier's eyes roved down their lines, as a professional duty. It was necessary to keep a sharp look-out. He had known a woman to grab some of the winnings. He had seen a man steal a pearl necklace while the woman who wore it was absorbed in her play. To-night he noticed a man standing behind the others, with a strained expression on his face—uneasy, disapproving, pitiful. He was a tall, middle-aged man with grey hair and a ruddy face. English, of course, one of those English hypocrites, thought the croupier, coming to study the vices of the "idle rich," very shocked because women show their bare arms, but secretly disappointed because it was all so respectable. He would go back and write

a letter to his parish magazine, "Flaming Sin at Monte Carlo." He knew the type, did this croupier who was so bored with the dulness of his life.

The woman by his side—Mrs. Fleming, yes, that was her name—had won again. It was her night out. Well, she needed it. She had had bad luck lately, he remembered.

There were only three inches between Mrs. Fleming and the croupier with his ivory rake which distributed gains and losses as carelessly as though these "chips" were worthless counters. He could hear the sharp indrawing of her breath which she tried to quieten. But he could not know the violence of her emotion, the wild rush of thoughts that were racing through her brain, while, very calmly as it seemed, with a quite steady hand, with no change of expression on her face—she had learnt that amount of self-discipline—she placed her stakes on the table haphazard, without thought, recklessly, and saw them win, again and again.

She would be able to pay her debts in Monte Carlo, or some of them. . . . She could get away from that man who wanted a "share" of her children. . . . She would hide her new address from everyone. Even from dear old Henry and brother Jack. . . . She could get out of that villa without a scene; anyhow, without the police on her track. . . . She would buy Sylvia some new frocks. The poor girl needed them badly. . . . She would give Stephen his chance. A year in Paris in the Life school. He needed that, and they would see his genius. . . . Her luck was in again. God had forgotten His grudge. . . . Yes, she had won again! People were watching her, with admiration, with wonderment. Well, she wouldn't show by the quiver of an eyelid that she was a little mad with the joy of it, because it lifted the black shadow of fear and put her straight again, and saved the children from their father. She would never part with them.

Of course she couldn't always win. No, this time she lost. Well, that was always the way on the tables. A run of luck, then a few losses, then luck again, with higher stakes. Not to be afraid of the losses. That was the great game.

Perfect faith in a lucky night, beginning well. . . . Lost again! Courage! Courage! . . .

Mrs. Fleming had courage. The lookers-on admired her nerve when all her gains were swept away. Only by a slight tightening of the lips did she show the strain upon her, and her despair. When she rose from the table—cleaned-out, beggared—she did not tremble, or move awkwardly, or let her lips weaken. The people were watching her. She must not let them see the despair in her soul. Ruined. Yes, that was it, this time. Lost. Utterly broken. How could she tell Stephen and Sylvia? They were dancing somewhere in the Carnival. She would have to tell them. Or would it be better to let them find out? They would come home, stealing in on tip-toe, thinking her asleep. Supposing they found her asleep, and could not waken her? It might be better like that. People would help them. The young American would help, for Sylvia's sake. Or at least the Harveys. And Dick would get them after all! She would leave a note for him, saying, "More than a share. All yours now. But they'll always love me best, whatever you tell them." She would be asleep endlessly, unless she waked up to pay the price of wickedness—somewhere else. God might have something to say about it. But He would understand. He would not be hard on a woman who had done her best for her babes, suffered hell for them already. It would be easy to go to sleep, never to wake up, in that little villa. . . .

"Did you have good luck to-night, madame?" asked the woman attendant, with her kindly smile, as she wrapped Mrs. Fleming in her white cloak.

Mrs. Fleming smiled and shook her head.

"I was rather unlucky," she said, and was surprised at the strangeness of her own voice.

She saw two or three people she knew, and nodded to them.

"We have just left your young people, Mrs. Fleming," said a tall Englishwoman with an elderly man who looked like one of the generals of the Great War. "Sylvia looks

adorable and the American young man is having a great time with her."

"Splendid!" said Mrs. Fleming.

She laughed and nodded, and passed into the central hall of the Casino and, in spite of the heat, shivered a little, and felt all the colour ebb from her face. It would be silly if she fainted now, after wearing her mask so well.

Some one touched her on the arm and spoke to her.

"You're looking ill. Better take my arm, Helen. I've been watching you. Those high stakes! Good heavens!"

It was her husband, Colonel Fleming, looking distressed and pitiful.

She turned round slowly, and swayed a little, and put her hands up to her throat, and then laughed in a foolish, hysterical way, as though a little mad.

"You here?" she said. "Well, you've won the children from me. That ought to please you."

She put her hand against a marble pillar and laughed again, but in a queer, strange way.

"Hush!" said Colonel Fleming, nervously. "Don't make a scene, Helen. Not here—with all those people about. If you cared to take my arm——"

He put his hand on her arm and led her out of the Casino into the gardens. They stood in the shadow of the palm trees, like the lovers who hide there for the sake of kisses.

"Helen," said the man, "I'm afraid you've been very foolish. This gambling! . . . Horrible!"

"I wanted the money," she said, with a kind of wailing cry. "How do you think I live?"

She swayed again, and would have fallen if he had not helped her to a seat, one of those wooden seats painted white, up the little avenue where the motor-cars stand waiting for the crowd inside. A group of chauffeurs were talking and smoking. One of them gave a loud guffaw and spoke in Cockney accents. "Gord, what a life!"

Colonel Fleming stood in front of his wife, staring at her thoughtfully.

"Do you mean to say you've been living in that way? Playing for money? Surely not, Helen! It's madness!"

She did not answer him, and put her handkerchief to her lips, looking very ill, as he could see.

"I thought your people were looking after you," he said. "I understood your brother made you an allowance. In any case——"

She made an impatient movement, but did not speak.

Colonel Fleming poked the gravel about with his stick, as he had done when he first talked to her, two days before.

"If it's money you want," he said, "you can draw on me. I've never been mean. Every penny I've saved are for the boy and girl. I always made that clear to your brother. Why didn't you ask for it before? It's been lying there in Coutts's. Not a great deal, but enough to save you from—well, this kind of thing. Why didn't you, Helen?"

She answered him for the first time, with a kind of hard scorn.

"You know why I didn't. I wanted to keep my children for myself, so that they should owe nothing to you. Don't you understand what pride means?"

Colonel Fleming groaned a little, and then laughed rather bitterly.

"Pride? I've lived on it! You've never taken my feelings into account. A lonely devil in India eating his heart out, brooding over a wrecked life, sensitive, too—damnably sensitive to the old scandal of it. 'Richard Fleming,' they said. 'Yes, his wife ran away from him. Couldn't stand his temper! As hard as nails, I should say.'—Hard, yes, but it's the strong man who suffers most. Proud! Yes, too proud to wear my heart on my sleeve."

Mrs. Fleming was silent again. She sat on the wooden seat as though turned to stone, except that for a moment she was shaken by a sob.

Colonel Fleming spoke more gently, even with a certain pity.

"All that's an old story. I'm sorry I went back on it. I've forgiven you after all these years, though you say you don't want my forgiveness. Well, that doesn't matter much, either. What matters now is the children's welfare,

and my duty to them, and my claim to them. A share of them."

He used that word "share" again, and it seemed to madden Mrs. Fleming, so that she cried out aloud, as though agonised.

"Hush!" said her husband. "Hush! Be sensible, Helen!"

"They're all yours now," she said, in a dull, despairing voice. "I'm beaten. I've lost everything. The children, and all I've lived for. I'm down and out, with no pride left. . . . I wish I were dead!"

She broke into a passion of weeping, out of control.

Colonel Fleming was alarmed. He tried to soothe her, even put his hand on her shoulder.

"It isn't as bad as all that. What's in your mind, Helen? I don't want to take the boy and girl away from you. Surely I can see them now and then? As for the money side of things, I can straighten that out. No need to worry about that. I want to be reasonable—and kind. Kind in every possible way. Considerate. If you'll let me know your troubles—and your wishes—I don't want to thrust in brutally, or put the law to work, or anything like that. Now, be sensible. Pull yourself together, my dear. Hush, hush! I beg of you."

Mrs. Fleming fell back against the back of the seat in a state of collapse. She looked very ill, alarmingly ill, to the husband, who was watching her with anxious eyes.

I'll take you home," he said. "I can't leave you here—like that. Impossible!"

For a moment he left her, but it was to signal to one of the drivers of the waiting cars.

"Give me a hand," he said. "This lady is unwell."

Together they carried her into the car.

"Drive up the road behind the Hôtel des Anglais," said Colonel Fleming. "There's a little villa on the left. The Villa Margherita. I'll tell you when we get there."

IX

SYLVIA had a wonderful time at the *Bal Masqué*. The Hôtel de Paris had spared no expense in the way of decoration and had wreathed its pillars in flowers brought in cartloads from Grasse. The Russian orchestra—"Princes, most of them, according to tradition!" said the American with an unbelieving smile—looked very splendid in national costume, with white silk shirts embroidered in gold, and black top-boots. They played jazz tunes with a touch of barbarity which whipped the blood of the dancers if it hadn't worn too thin and tired by excess of pleasure. For once youth had the majority. This was not a gathering of retired colonels and elderly ladies, as at Mentone, but of tennis-playing girls disguised in fancy-dress and young men of leisure and wealth who still seemed to exist very comfortably in the ruins of Europe.

Stephen thought most of them rather poisonous. He disliked the way they oiled their hair, their affected way of speech, their smiling insolence. Sylvia was critical of the English girls, whom she accused of a lamentable lack of feminine charm, but was full of admiration for the young men and especially for those who seemed most poisonous to Stephen. The foreign element was rather alarming—to Mr. Edward Hillier of Grand Rapids, though Sylvia assured him that the ladies were not so wicked as they looked and that the men were of the highest order of profiteers.

"A dreadful crowd!" said the American, with what Sylvia considered to be a national intolerance. "Some of these women ought not to be allowed in places like this. As for the men, they look to me like international crooks."

"I expect your ancestors were Puritans," said Sylvia. "They probably went over with the Pilgrim Fathers because they disapproved of Shakespeare's plays and the naughtiness of the Stuart Court. Poor dears!"

"I confess to being a Puritan," said Edward Hillier, with his grave smile. "Some of these people seem to me the reason why Europe is slipping downhill. After seeing Famine in Russia and all the misery of Austria and Poland, it gets my goat to see all these decadent-looking people with their alarming ladies."

"It's life," said Sylvia, with enthusiastic eyes. "It's Europe! It's enormously amusing. And you've got it all wrong, Mr. Hillier. Most of these people are very charming when you know them. You see that dark-looking man, like Mephistopheles? Looks as though he had made a hobby of murder, doesn't he? Why, that's Mr. Lemington-Smith, the great philanthropist who endowed the Hospital for Incurables at Davos Platz. And that alarming lady with the grapes in her hair and lovely white arms! That's the Countess Kutuzoff, who keeps a hat-shop at Nice and works fourteen hours a day for her invalid husband. And over there—that swarthy young man with an elongated nose—he's the French 'ace,' Armand du Baty, wounded eight times, and decorated for a hundred acts of valour. Not so decadent!"

"I take it all back," said the American. "And I apologise for talking like the death's head at the feast. I asked you here for a merry evening, and I've nearly wrecked the whole show. Now what do you think of that?"

"I'm going to have a good time," said Sylvia. "And when are we going to dance?"

Stephen did not see very much of her, except in fleeting glimpses among the dancers, when she smiled at him over the shoulder of Edward Hillier, and once, in passing, said, "Cheer up, Stephen. You look as grumpy as a bear with a sore ear."

He felt as grumpy as that, and worse. He felt like a lover with a sore heart. That scene with his mother had taken the spirit out of him. He was stricken with the tragedy of it, and horrified by her revelation of the mystery that had puzzled him in a vague, uneasy way. She had kept them by playing for money! Could anything be more frightful? His beautiful, laughing mother sneaking into Casinos, pre-

tending that she was only watching other people, deceiving them, lying to them—yes, lying!—and robbing wretched tradespeople by leaving her bills unpaid. It was the most horrible thing he could ever imagine. It was as though all the beauty of life had been exposed as a crawling disease, a filthy thing. He would rather his mother had died than let herself get dragged down like that. He wished to God he had died without knowing it. It had spoilt everything!

What was the good of his art, now, all his love of colour and line, his desperate efforts to get form and technique, to express the joy and grace of things? There was no grace. No joy henceforth. Only the damned conviction that the mother whom he had believed to be perfect, and who had been his inspiration in all things and his purpose in life, had smashed all his faith. She had been his religion. He had worshipped her. He had made up his mind never to marry, so that he should stay with her always, working for her, winning fame for her, laying his pictures at her feet and saying, "Yours, Mother!" Now he would never be able to believe her again. When she laughed he would wonder what secret she was hiding. When she joked he would think, "She's just pretending. It's all humbug."

Perhaps Sylvia was just a sham, too. Not caring a curse really for the decent things of life, not more honest than her mother! Perhaps she would go wrong in the same way, or worse. . . . There she was, in the arms of that American, looking very innocent and gay, making a fool of that grave-looking fellow who smiled down at her as though she were a child or a fairy thing. Perhaps her mind was crawling with evil thoughts. Perhaps she was ready to play any rotten kind of game! . . .

Stephen Fleming, this boy with a sore heart, dressed as a Spanish troubadour, dancing with a dark-eyed girl who was heavy on her feet, felt more like weeping than anything in the world. There were moments when he was scared lest he should have tears in his eyes. He would make a pretty fool of himself if he suddenly began to blub in the sight of all those people flinging streamers at each other,

laughing with a noise that was louder than the Russian orchestra.

"I'm afraid you're not enjoying yourself," said Miss Harvey. "Don't mind saying if I bore you!"

"Not at all," said Stephen. "I'm having a great time! Only I'm not much good at prattle."

. . . Whatever happened, he would stick to his mother. He was a cad to think of her in the way he did. She had done it all for his sake, and Sylvia's. Nothing could alter the way she had loved them. All those years of devotion to them! They couldn't be wiped out because she had played for money now and then. He was making far too much of it. It was foolish, of course, but not wrong. Everybody played a bit when they came to Monte Carlo. He was just a prig, thinking himself very virtuous and noble-minded. There was only one thing to consider. How could they get straight and pay their way? She had lost everything, she said. Well, that wasn't so very dreadful, after all. He could get a job somehow, and Sylvia could go into a hat-shop, or something—like those Russian princesses.

He wouldn't let his mother worry her heart out. That was the great thing—to save her from worry. She'd had too much of it. And her pluck had been unbeatable. What wonderful pluck, to show a laughing face to life all that time, never to let them guess that she was anxious or unhappy! What a dirty little cad he was to have all those morbid, priggish thoughts! Loyalty was the great thing in life, and for a little while he had been disloyal. He would try to pay back to her. She had worked for him and Sylvia. Well, it was up to them to pay back and work for her. Whatever people said, his mother was the most wonderful woman in the world, and the most adorable, and the most beautiful. He would bash anyone who said otherwise. . . .

He would have to tell Sylvia, but there wasn't a chance, with that American. Oh, this ghastly dance!

"Your sister dances beautifully," remarked Miss Harvey. "Quite the best in the room."

"Think so?" said Stephen. "Let's go and get an ice, or something."

Later in the evening he danced with Sylvia, but he said nothing about his mother. Impossible in a place like that! They couldn't have a scene in public. And he couldn't trust himself to tell her without emotion. Better say nothing until they were home again. He would go to her bedroom and tell her there.

Sylvia had something to tell *him*.

"Stephen!" she whispered, and her eyes were very bright and mirthful. "I've had an invitation to go to the United States. Quite a serious invitation. It might mean a long stay—if I accepted."

She laughed at the idea, as though it were a very great joke, and she blushed rather vividly.

"We can't afford it," growled Stephen. "We're not millionaires." He did not tell her that they were paupers.

"Well, I should have my fare paid, I expect," said Sylvia, smiling at him mysteriously. "Unfortunately I shouldn't have a return ticket, and that's what worries me!"

"Sorry I don't get the joke," said Stephen, grumpily.

"It's rather a good joke," answered Sylvia, laughing again at the comedy of life. "How would you like to be the brother of Mrs. Edward P. Hillier of Grand Rapids, U.S.A.?"

"Good God!" said Stephen.

Sylvia agreed that it sounded ridiculous. She couldn't imagine herself as Mrs. Edward P. Hillier of Grand Rapids, U.S.A. Still, in order to assuage the natural fears of an anxious brother, she didn't mind telling him that she had no idea of accepting the invitation. Without a return ticket to Europe, it was not attractive to a lady who was thoroughly European in body, bones and spirit, and who was not yet tired of a charming mother and a grumpy brother with an artistic temperament.

"All the same, it's a joke," she said. "I find it wonderfully amusing. It's the first invitation of the kind I've ever received, and as such I cherish it. But there may be others, not so far from home."

"Do you mean to say the American has fallen in love with you?" asked Stephen bluntly.

"Well, I wouldn't put it quite as strong as that," said Sylvia, "but he asked me whether I would be his dear little wife."

The joke of the thing overcame her again and she laughed so much that she fell out of step with Stephen.

"It's incredible!" said Stephen.

Sylvia did not agree that it was incredible. On the contrary, she thought it was perfectly natural and the sort of thing that might happen to any nice girl. Obviously that sort of thing did happen even outside the covers of books. Otherwise there could be no weddings, and the world would come to a dead stop.

"Are you gone on him at all?" asked Stephen, with the brutal frankness of younger brothers.

Sylvia was calm, candid and judicial.

"I don't feel that sensation of goneness which I'm given to understand should precede a contract of marriage," she answered. "He's nice, he's charming, he's quite good looking, and I like him very much. I should say he would make a very good husband—in the American manner. Beyond that I do not commit myself, Stephen."

"The thing's too utterly absurd!" said Stephen. "For one thing, he's old enough to be your father."

Sylvia disagreed again. She rebuked her brother for exaggeration. Mr. Hillier was exactly thirty. A nice age for an elder brother, but far too young for a father, as far as she was concerned. A good marrying age, she thought.

Her pretended gravity broke down again. She gave a little squeal of laughter.

"Stephen dear! It's frightfully funny—and I will say I feel rather pleased about it. It's a tribute to your little sister."

"The sooner we go home the better," said Stephen. "I'm dead sick of this ghastly dance."

He was inwardly alarmed by what Sylvia told him. It opened up new gulfs under his feet. Supposing that fellow

whisked her off to the United States, or any fellow anywhere? He had never dreamed that such a thing was possible so soon. Life without Sylvia would be unimaginable. Who would sew on his buttons? Even his mother jibed at buttons. Who in the world could he discuss life with from the point of view of his own age? Quarrel with? Play with? They had been good pals. Like twins. He would feel cut in half without her. The United States! She might as well go to the moon. . . . Curse that American, anyhow!

An hour later, after a miserable time with the Harvey girl, who couldn't dance and suspected him of thinking so, he grabbed Sylvia by the arm and said, "Look here, let's go! I've something frightful to tell you, and it won't wait."

She saw by the look in his eyes that he was serious.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Every blessed thing," he answered. "The mater——"

He gulped down his words, and looked so distressed that Sylvia agreed to go.

They had to take the Harvey girl back to her hotel, and the American drove them home. Sylvia sat next to him as usual, with Stephen in the back seat. They were both rather silent. Round the curve of the road above Monte Carlo Stephen was startled to see lights gleaming in the windows of the Villa Margherita. It had been in darkness when he left, except for the lamp in his mother's bedroom. Strange, that!

"I shall write to you from London," said the American to Sylvia.

Stephen sprang out of the car first, and ran up the path. There was a strange car outside the door. He was stricken with a sharp anguish at the thought that his mother was ill. That might be a doctor's car. What a beast he had been to leave her like that. . . . Good God!

He fumbled for his latch-key in that ridiculous costume of his.

In the hall the light was up, and he saw a man standing in the doorway of the drawing-room. He recognised him instantly as the elderly visitor to whom they had given tea

one day. Perhaps a doctor? . . . He was panic-stricken.

"Is my mother ill?" he asked breathlessly.

"An attack of nerves," said Colonel Fleming. "Nothing serious, I think."

Stephen stared at him. "Are you a doctor?" he stammered.

Colonel Fleming hesitated, and gave a nervous cough. His hand trembled a little as he held it out to Stephen.

"Funny thing!" he said gravely. "It will seem very queer to you. I'm your father, old man. . . . Where's Sylvia?"

X

IT was Sylvia who handled the situation most successfully. Stephen was stunned, almost speechless. He was incapable even of telling Sylvia who this stranger was, and Colonel Fleming had to introduce himself again.

"What's all this?" she had asked, in a quick, startled way. "What's the matter with Mother? Why are you here?"

"Don't be alarmed," said Colonel Fleming very gently. "Your mother's all right. I'm your father, Sylvia."

Sylvia stared at him with searching eyes, utterly astonished, hostile, a little suspicious. Perhaps it was her sense of humour which came to her rescue in that moment of astounding drama. She spoke with a touch of sarcasm, but quite politely.

"Pleased to meet you, Father, as the Americans say. You're quite a stranger. And this is a late hour for calling round, isn't it?"

Colonel Fleming permitted himself a faint smile. He was conscious of his daughter's sarcasm, and of her hostility.

"It's not an hour I should have chosen for a visit, my dear. I met your mother in the Casino. She wasn't very well, and allowed me to bring her home. . . . I'm not staying."

"I'd better go to her," said Stephen.

He was as pale as death, and lurched to the door as though a little drunk.

"She's all right now," said Colonel Fleming.

Sylvia stopped her brother with an impetuous gesture.

"Stay with me, Stephen. I daresay Mother can do without us for a little while. Now that we have Father here it might be well to have a little talk together. He might care to tell us, for instance, why he treated Mother so disgracefully, and why he has left her all this time without any

kind of help, while she drudged for us and paid every blessed thing for us."

Colonel Fleming had winced under the word "disgracefully," and his face had turned colour to a deeper shade of ruddiness.

"My dear," he said, "you're a young woman now. There are things you ought to know. If you care to listen to me——"

"Not to anything against Mother," said Sylvia, in a hard voice. She was utterly loyal to her mother. She was not going to allow this man to say any slanderous thing.

Colonel Fleming made a little gesture, as though asking for a hearing.

"I'm not here to abuse your mother," he said, quietly. "On the contrary, I'm grateful to her for the way she has brought you up, if I may say so without offense."

"It's not offensive, Father," said Sylvia, more graciously, as though prepared to be quite fair to him. "All the same——"

"Yes, all the same——?"

Colonel Fleming took up her phrase and seemed to think over it deeply.

"Perhaps you had better sit down," said Sylvia. "One may as well pretend that it's quite a usual kind of visit."

"That's charming of you," answered Colonel Fleming, with just the hint of a twinkle in his eyes. "Thank you, my dear."

"Stephen, get Father a chair," said Sylvia.

Stephen pushed forward a chair, and spoke in a low voice.

"I'm going to see Mother. I *must* see her."

"Very well," said Sylvia. "Only don't be long."

Stephen went to his mother's door, but it was locked.

He tapped quietly, and called out, not too loud:

"Mother! You all right now?"

She was weeping, and the sound of it made his heart weaken. But she spoke with pretended cheerfulness.

"It's all right, sonny. I'll be out in a minute or two. Don't worry."

He waited outside the door awhile, anxiously, yet with a sense of enormous relief. Anyhow his mother wasn't dead, or dying.

He went back to the sitting-room, not looking at his father.

Colonel Fleming was waiting by the table, on which he had placed his opera-hat. He leaned forward a little, with his stick between his knees and his gloves in one hand. He was speaking to Sylvia.

"I daresay your mother has painted a black picture of me, eh? She's told you how hard I was, how violent in temper, how little I understood her, and how cold and selfish I was in those early days of our married life. Isn't that so?"

"That's so, Father," answered Sylvia, with that hostile note in her voice.

"Well," said Colonel Fleming, slowly, "all that's perfectly true. Looking back on things, I see now that I must have been a very trying fellow as a husband. Intolerable sometimes, no doubt! Marriage is rather a difficult thing, my dear. An eternal hazard. So many risks. Especially marriage between a soldier in India, rather keen on his job, putting Duty before everything, having an exaggerated idea of his own importance, very likely, and a beautiful girl, fond of gaiety, liking society and admiration and all that —very natural!—and hating the loneliness of an Indian hill station."

He was endeavouring to be greatly generous, to avoid any word of harshness about this woman who was his wife, for the sake of this boy and girl.

"Do you follow me?" he asked, after a silence.

"Perfectly," said Sylvia, in her grown-up way. "Mother had a very thin time with you. Isn't that what you mean?"

"That's exactly what I mean," answered Colonel Fleming. "Very thin indeed, as far as my memory goes. I have often reproached myself since. When it was too late. Too late, my dear!" He sighed deeply.

"And so——?" asked Sylvia.

She looked at her father with enquiring eyes, not quite so

hostile, but like a child wishing to hear the end of a very exciting tale.

"And so," said Colonel Fleming, with a kind of heavy groan, "things went wrong, you know. Devilish wrong, in fact my dear."

"In what way?" asked Sylvia.

Colonel Fleming stared at the grey gloves in his hand as though he saw them for the first time.

"Well," he answered, after a long pause. "In a way which some people, not believing as much as I do in Duty and all that,—it's my fetish!—would call the inevitable way."

"Meaning——?" said Sylvia, with a note of interrogation in her voice.

"Meaning that a beautiful woman like your mother, so gay, so lonely, so badly treated by her fool of a husband—a perfect idiot, as I see him now!—found another man whom she believed to be kinder, more understanding, more comradely, not such a believer in duty and all that."

Sylvia drew a deep breath. There was a look, not of horror, but of pity in her eyes.

"Poor Mother!"

"Yes," said Colonel Fleming. "Beyond doubt. A tragedy, my dear."

"Poor Father!" she said, and there was no note of hostility in her voice that time, and she spoke the words very quietly though Colonel Fleming heard them, and looked up, rather startled, with a sort of look that a dog gives for a pat on the head after a hard thrashing. A grateful, surprised look.

"Well, that's that," he said. "Ancient history, my dear, and rather painful. No use raking it up though. One can't put back the hand of the clock or pretend it didn't happen. It did happen, alas! with lamentable results for your mother and myself."

"Mother has suffered most," said Sylvia.

Colonel Fleming agreed.

"Women always do. At least, that's the general idea. Men carry on with their jobs. I carried on with mine, got up to the neck in it, forgot everything else, except now and then, when it hurt again, like an old wound."

His mind seemed to rove backwards to those days. In the silence that followed there was the sound of a singing voice in the road outside. It was a peasant-boy, going home after a night of Carnival.

"You forgot us," said Sylvia, presently. "Wasn't that a bit mean of you, Father?"

"In a way, yes," he said. "Though I meant it generously. I didn't realise how quickly you young people grow! I thought, 'I'm not going to punish—well, to hurt a woman through her children.' That seemed to me the meanest thing. Time enough to look after them, I thought, when they can understand the meaning of things. So the years passed—lots of trouble in India—then the war—then more trouble. Now I've finished with India, and they've finished with me. All my service goes for nothing. And I'm a lonely old man, my dear, without anyone to care a toss for me, unless I can win your friendship, and Stephen's there."

It did not look like winning Stephen's friendship. The boy sat with a frown on his face, listening with tightened lips, with once now and then a look of something like hate for that man who was his father.

He missed some of the talk that followed between Sylvia and that man. He was thinking of those days when his mother had met the old man in the Indian hill station. He was all on her side.

"What's your idea, Father?" Sylvia was asking, when he heard her again. She was quite polite but a little cold.

Colonel Fleming thought over his idea, drawing a pattern on the carpet with the ferrule of his stick, just as he had poked about in the gravel of the Casino gardens when talking to Sylvia's mother.

"I had an idea that I might see you and your brother now and then. You might come to tea. We might go to the Zoo together, and that sort of thing. A little show now and again . . . London society—in a quiet way, if there's any left! You might get a bit fond of me. You might even come and stay with me for a week or two occasionally, down at the old place in Sussex, which has come into my hands again now that your Uncle Frank is dead."

"Uncle Frank?"

Sylvia's voice showed surprise. She had never heard of Uncle Frank.

"Yes, my eldest brother. And one of the best. Commanded a cavalry brigade in France when the war was on. Got shot, like most of my friends."

He came back to his idea.

"Your mother tells me she is—well—a bit short of money. Hard up, you know. I'm not rich, but I can put that all right. I shall arrange an allowance, and it won't be mean. It has always been waiting for you, only your mother didn't care to take it."

"Why not?" asked Sylvia.

"Women are queer things," said the Colonel.

Sylvia objected to that remark. She made an immediate protest.

"On the contrary! And please remember I'm one of them, Father!"

For the first time that evening he laughed.

"Forgive me, my dear. A foolish slip of the tongue, and quite unfair, no doubt. Yes, you're becoming a woman. Too quickly. Good Lord! I had no idea."

Sylvia stood up and leaned on the back of her chair.

"Father," she said, "apart from that little slip, I must say you've put things rather nicely. Personally I'm inclined to let bygones be bygones. Of course I don't know how Mother feels about it, and it depends a good deal on her, but as far as I'm concerned, I don't see why we shouldn't get to like each other."

"That's good!" said Colonel Fleming. "I'm glad to hear you say so."

He looked at her with a kind of wistful admiration.

"And if Mother is inclined to be reasonable," said Sylvia, as though she rather doubted it, "I don't see at all why she and you shouldn't get on together again and be quite happy in your old age."

Colonel Fleming seemed to be taken aback by those words. He gave a little gasp, and dropped his gloves.

"No!" he exclaimed harshly. "That's out of the question.

After what I've told you—after what happened, my dear—I should have thought you understood that such a thing is utterly impossible. Absolutely and entirely impossible."

"Well," said Sylvia, "I don't pretend to understand these things to their depths—there may be things I still have to learn—but that seems to me the most satisfactory plan, and very nice for all of us."

Colonel Fleming laughed, not unkindly.

"You're very young, my dear! If you'll allow me to say so."

Sylvia looked inclined to argue the point. She had already been asked to marry a man of thirty. That surely gave her some standing in a situation of this kind. However . . .

"Well, we won't argue that point just now, Father. It's getting late, and I daresay Mother wonders what we're talking about. But you can rely on me to put things in a good light. Fair to you. Fair to Mother."

"I'm grateful, my dear," said Colonel Fleming, and he stooped and kissed her hand.

"What you say about London, Father," said Sylvia "appeals to me a good deal. It certainly would be nice to do a few shows together, as you say, and have a look at English society from the inside. And if you could set up Stephen in a studio somewhere in Chelsea, it would be jolly good for him, and great fun for me."

"That's easy," said Colonel Fleming. "That wouldn't ruin me, I imagine."

"Then it seems to me," remarked Sylvia, "that things are working out rather well, Father. I'm very glad you had the idea of calling in—after all this time."

She spoke again with that little touch of humour which played round many of her words, but there was an excitement in her eyes which showed that she was looking forward to that adventure in London.

"I ought to be going," said Colonel Fleming.

He rose and picked up his gloves, and glanced with a friendly smile at Stephen, who still sat glum.

"Tell your mother there's no need to worry any more. Tell her that I want to be—generous—and kind. Not only

in money matters, I mean. That's nothing. But in all ways."

"I'll tell her that everything's arranged," Sylvia assured him. She gave a little laughing cry:

"God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world!"

"Well," said Colonel Fleming cautiously, "I wouldn't go quite as far as that. As far as the world's concerned I find it decidedly *not* all right. It seems to me all wrong."

"It's a perfectly good world," said Sylvia. "I find it extremely interesting."

She held out her cheek to her father, and he kissed it with a shy courtesy which pleased and amused her. Though she couldn't tell anyone—not even Stephen it was the second kiss on her cheek that night. And both by rather shy and courteous men.

"I think we shall get quite friendly, Father," she remarked quite cordially. "When we get to know each other a little better."

"I'm sure of it, my dear," he answered warmly. He put his hand on Stephen's shoulders and said, "You too, old boy."

He went out of the house, and Sylvia and Stephen listened to the sound of the motor-car going slowly down the path to the road beyond.

"Stephen!" cried Sylvia in an excited voice. "What do you think of it all? Isn't it wonderful?"

"It's hell," said Stephen gloomily.

And then he drew a sharp breath and stood up from his chair, with his face flushed and a new light in his eyes.

"Mother!"

Mrs. Fleming stood in the doorway. She came forward with wet eyes.

"Oh, my dears!" she cried. "Oh, my dears!"

She put her arms out and caught Stephen in them as he went towards her, and held him tight, as though she would never let him go.

"It's all right," he said, very shyly and brokenly. "No

need to worry, Mother. We're all on your side. Just as before—only more so."

Mrs. Fleming asked a frightened question, with a sob in her throat.

"Is he going to take you away from me? I couldn't bear it!"

It was Sylvia who answered:

"Good Lord, no, Mother! What a ridiculous idea! As if we'd let anybody take us away from you! Not all the King's horses nor all the King's men! But all the same, we've got to be reasonable. And it's going to be very pleasant in London, now that the season is beginning."

"London?" exclaimed Mrs. Fleming, wiping her tears away furtively.

"Yes, Mother. London! Stephen is going to have a studio, and I shall have tea with Father now and then, if you don't mind very much, and we'll have a look at England before the British Empire falls to pieces, as the old colonels are always saying. . . . By the bye, does Father think England is going to the dogs?"

Mrs. Fleming had a sense of humour too, in spite of everything. It had been her saving grace through life. It had been her source of courage. And through her tears she laughed again. It was Sylvia who had saved the situation on a night of Carnival.

XI

MRS. FLEMING was one of those women who recover rapidly from episodes of emotion. For some days she was very quiet, thoughtful and unhappy. But gradually, when she realised that all her worst fears were illusory, she was filled with a sense of relief that was almost rejuvenating. For years she had lived in fear of her absent husband and his undoubted but unasserted right to claim the children. For all these years another fear had lurked behind her natural gaiety and her habit of shirking the past and the future and living only for the present. It was the fear that Stephen and Sylvia would despise her and take their father's side when the story of her desertion of him should be told less vaguely than by her own hints and subterfuges. But it was clear now that neither of these terrors had been justified. She had been let off in a miraculous way.

Her husband had made it quite clear to Sylvia when she went to see him to settle financial arrangements—her miserable debts and the rent of the Villa Margherita—that he had no intention of taking either Stephen or Sylvia away from their mother. He proposed that they should live in London, on the most generous allowance he could afford to give them, while he went down to his old house in Sussex—Oakwood Court—where perhaps the boy and girl might visit him now and then for a few days. The East India Club in town would serve him very well, he said, for occasional visits to London, when he might give Sylvia a peep at things in a social way and stand Stephen a lunch, if he didn't feel too bored with an elderly father who was a stranger to him. . . . Well, it was generous of him. Mrs. Fleming acknowledged that to herself, with thankfulness for the generosity and a pang of self-reproach for the harshness with which she had always thought of him when sometimes, in wakeful nights, old memories had

refused to keep their secret cupboards. Perhaps he had changed since those days, softened a little, become broadened by years and less arrogant, less autocratic, than in their married days. She did not challenge Sylvia when, returning from one of those visits to the Hôtel des Anglais, the girl said with sudden enthusiasm, "I must say that Father is a great gentleman, Mother."

"Yes," said Mrs. Fleming. "He was always a sahib, Sylvia. I shouldn't have married him otherwise."

"Whatever his bad treatment in the past, Mother, and of course he must have been very unkind to you, we must admit that he's behaving very nicely now. He's paying for everything, without a murmur."

"He can afford it," said Mrs. Fleming. "We've been no cost to him for years. He has had only himself to keep."

"Yes, but other men might have found that quite enough to keep. Or taken another wife and found her very expensive."

"His religion forbade him that," explained Mrs. Fleming, and she did not add that she had once been of the same religion, until she slipped out of it, after the trouble happened, as she had slipped out of other ways of thought and re-shaped her life and faith on less exacting lines. She had revolted against the discipline of faith as she had revolted against the discipline of marriage, and she had brought her children up without religion except that of love and beauty and liberty, as far as she could give them. Sometimes she had been troubled about that, chiefly for Sylvia's sake. It would have been easier to quote spiritual authority for the inevitable restraints, the warnings and prohibitions which she had been obliged to make to a girl with so adventurous a spirit as Sylvia, especially lately, when she was demanding the joy of life, no longer as a child, but as a young woman conscious of her own allurement.

But she was sure of their love for her. The dread moment of her life was past and it made no difference. She had been a fool to worry herself into fiddle-strings on that score. Stephen, who took things more seriously than

Sylvia and was more thoughtful about life, and more sentimental in his boyish way, tried to prove to her that if his father's return and the clearing up of mystery—she had been over-emotional that night!—made any difference at all, it was rather to make him love her more, and not less, than ever. He lingered about her instead of going for his usual walks, kissed her more tenderly when he took breakfast to her, showed his fidelity in his eyes, though he said nothing more after those broken sentences on the night of fear. God, after all—that God Whom she had put into the background of her mind with Dick and England and other things about which she had not thought very much—had been very kind. She had had the luckiest escape! She had been liberated from all her nagging cares, on the very edge of the precipice over which she had almost plunged after that night of gambling. Well, she would never indulge in *that* folly again! It had been utter madness from the start, as she could now see with clear eyes. It had been a vice, like drug-taking, and she was cured by the shock of terror.

She was astonished by her own freedom from care, by the way in which she had come scot-free out of all this misery of mind. In future she would be less of a fool, and take no risks. A quiet, humdrum life in London, looking after Stephen and Sylvia, devoting herself to their happiness and not grudging the old man—not very old, after all!—an occasional visit from his son and daughter. She might even think about religion again one day, and put her soul right. Perhaps take up spiritualism, or Christian Science, which seemed a help to people who had lost all other faith. Well, time enough for that! . . .

Meanwhile Mrs. Fleming was excited at the thought of seeing London again, and old friends. Henry Carey's visit had revived her sense of exile. She had been very foolish to stay away so long abroad, afraid of scandal at home, and drifting into a nomad kind of life in foreign watering-places and winter resorts, after Paris and Rome. Sylvia spoke English with a foreign accent, trilled her "Rs" too much, was more fluent in French and Italian.

Stephen was more John Bullish, extraordinarily English in spite of his years of foreign life. . . . It would be exciting to take them about London, show them the beauty-spots—Kensington Gardens, where she had first met Dick (though she needn't tell them that)—tulip time in Hyde Park, Bond Street on a spring morning.

She wondered what they would think of her erratic brother, their Uncle Jack, who was out of a job again, and arranging some new way of making a fortune quickly, just as in the old days when they had lived together in Redcliffe Gardens, before he threw up his work in a lawyer's office and went out to Australia to dig for gold, which he couldn't find. He had done rather well in the war, they said, a D.S.O. and all that, but now he was living in some boarding-house in London, trying to find work and sponging on old friends, of whom Henry Carey was the most loyal.

Well, it would be fun to see old Jack again and listen to his ridiculous nonsense, his wild exaggerations, his unbounded optimism in future luck! All her family had had that belief in their own luck. It was in her blood, she supposed. The reckless Rivingtons they had been called in the eighteenth century, when their great-grandfather had gambled all his fortune away at White's and then gone out to die like a gentleman in the Peninsular War. Probably it was the strain of that great grandfather which had come out at the tables at Monte Carlo and elsewhere, tempting her, jogging her elbow and saying, "Back your luck; it's bound to turn." The wicked old villain!

She sent a telegram to her brother Jack, telling him to meet her at Victoria station on the following Saturday, when it was arranged between Sylvia and her father—they did not consult her much—that they should arrive in London, after a night in Paris. It would be hateful to get to London without a soul to greet them. She also wrote to Henry Carey, telling him the wonderful news. That old lover of hers—perfectly harmless, poor old dear!—would be glad to have her in England again.

"You had better hunt for that little house," she wrote, "somewhere in the Kensingtons, with a studio attached for

Stephen, if that is possible." She told him in a few vague words that Dick was inclined to be reasonable in his old age. "He's much tamed," she wrote—and felt a little mean after writing it—"since those old days in India when he felt that the responsibility of Empire rested entirely on his shoulders. I have promised to let him see my dear ones now and then, and he is satisfied with that. In return he will make them an allowance, which is long overdue after all these years, especially as he can well afford it. The emotion of it all has nearly killed me, old friend, but thank Heaven, I have a sense of humour which has always served me in good days and bad."

Mrs. Fleming's sense of humour reasserted itself on the journey to England, though she wept a tear or two at parting from the Villa Margherita, forgetting that she had hated it. Her husband was tactful enough to keep away from the station, though he had bought the first-class tickets at Cook's —with a second-class for poor old Madeleine, the French maid—and arranged, with great difficulty, for *wagons-lits* to Paris. He was travelling to England the next day, and going second-class, to save expense, which Sylvia thought was entirely unnecessary and rather degrading for such a distinguished-looking father.

"It's exactly like him," said Mrs. Fleming, from the corner of their first-class carriage. "He rather likes sacrificing himself for what he considers to be his duty, with a big D. It gives him a sense of moral austerity."

Sylvia lifted a finger in rebuke.

"Now, Mother, I can't allow the ancient grudge! We've got to play fair, you know, and I don't permit Father to say one word which is not entirely respectful to you."

Mrs. Fleming blushed at this protest, but it did not spoil her good humour.

"I know!" she said, with self-reproach. "I let my tongue run away with me. Henceforth I shall speak of your father in the same respectful way, provided he keeps to his side of the bargain. Respectful is a good word, Sylvia. Cold but dignified."

It was a word which seemed to amuse her, but Stephen hated the conversation anyhow.

"Hadn't we better avoid all mention of that particular individual?" he asked grumpily. "Personally, I want to forget his existence, as he was very glad to forget ours for all these years."

"He's going to be useful to us," remarked Sylvia cheerfully. "We've already cost him a good deal of money, and he's going to provide the wherewithal for our adventurous future. Also he happens to be the author of our little *egos,* for which I'm duly grateful, as life is pleasing to me."

"I loathe the idea of it all," said Stephen. "As soon as I can earn something of my own I won't take a penny of his beastly money."

Sylvia had already discovered that Stephen was suffering from what was called a "complex" with regard to his newfound father. He refused to talk about him, though she had so much to tell after those visits to the Hôtel des Anglais. He was furious with her because she mentioned more than once that she was beginning to like him a good deal, and flamed with indignation when she suggested that, as far as she could make out, there was something to be said on his side regarding the parental separation.

"After all," she remarked, "Mother did bunk from him. And she did have a love-affair of sorts with another man. It may be natural, but it's not considered right, according to extreme views on the subject of marriage. Of course I take broad views of these things, being perfectly modern, after a liberal education in French and Italian literature, but still, Stephen——"

She had not gone further in that sentence. It had been violently interrupted by Stephen, who had cried out with a kind of rage, "for Heaven's sake, shut up! The whole subject fills me with loathing. And if you're not loyal to Mother, I am."

She saw a distress in Stephen's eyes which warned her that their comradeship might be strained if she discussed this matter any further, and she decided that she would not risk it just then. After one or two visits Stephen would lose

his absurd prejudice against a father who was eager to make amends for past neglect and who had behaved already, she thought, in a very noble and knightly way. His shyness with her had not yet worn off, but he had a wistful look which always touched her when she left him. It was the look of a lonely man who craves for affection—and he had a smile which lighted up his tanned face and made a crowd of little wrinkles round his browny-yellow eyes—they were like Stephen's eyes exactly—which reminded her somewhat of Mr. Edward P. Hillier of Grand Rapids, U. S. A. It was a smile of amusement and homage which was not displeasing even from a father.

She watched her mother a little, that adorable, emotional, mysterious mother, and noticed how excited she was at the prospect of seeing England again. It was her mother who entered into conversation with a black-bearded Frenchman in the carriage with whom Stephen had to share his sleeping compartment, and she amazed and delighted him with her perfect French accent and entire agreement with the French point of view on political subjects.

"Perhaps you can explain to me, madame, why the great English people object to the French taking the Ruhr as a pledge of payment, and why at every turn the British Government try to thwart the legitimate demands of France for reparations and security?"

Mrs. Fleming was able to oblige him with the information. It was not the English people who were against France, but a gang of Socialists and anarchists who were in the pay of the Bolsheviks, and wished to overthrow the British Empire. She winked at Stephen, as though to say, "See what a lot I know!"

"But how about your Lord Curzon?" asked the Frenchman, greatly mystified.

"He has never recovered from being Viceroy of India," said Mrs. Fleming. "I used to know him out there. He has the firm conviction that when he lays down the law all men bow their heads. Even your Monsieur Poincaré!"

Mrs. Fleming's knowledge of international politics was limited to a casual glance at the leading articles in her

favourite morning paper, which was Conservative and "Die-Hard"—she was far more interested in the births, marriages and deaths—reinforced by the prejudices of her early life in a family which was strongly Imperialistic and anti-democratic. But it amused her to hold forth with some violence of opinion which she did not really feel, and she made even Stephen laugh and forget his troubles by the audacity with which she bluffed the bearded Frenchman. Ripples of laughter came from Sylvia that night in the *wagon-lit* because her mother insisted on sleeping in the upper berth, and upset the ladder on which she had to mount, so that she was left hanging by the skin of her teeth, as she explained to her hilarious daughter, before timely rescue.

And Stephen, lying in his own berth above "old Bluebeard," as his mother called his sleeping partner, smiled at the sound of her mirth and marvelled that she had forgotten so quickly that night of agony when she had told him the secret of her life, confessed that she had lost everything at the tables in Monte Carlo, and filled him with despair and shame. It was almost impossible to believe that that night had happened. Surely it was a bad dream! At the thought of it his blood ran cold again. Yet there was his mother, happy, in high spirits, quick to laugh and see the joke of things. He could not understand her. He still felt bewildered and hurt and wretched. He would never make friends with his father, whom Sylvia seemed to like so much. He belonged to his mother, whether she had been right or wrong, good or bad. Her love for him overwhelmed everything else, and as long as he lived he would never be able to pay her back for that.

They had a short evening in Paris, staying again at a small hotel in the rue St. Roch, where Stephen and Sylvia had lived during war days, until their flight to Avignon to escape the air raids. They were greeted with shrill cries of joy by Madame Bidou, still adding up figures in her little office, still overflowing with abundance of flesh and good-humour, still protesting against the fabulous prices of food-stuffs, still making mistakes in arithmetic which were invariably in her own favour, as they found when they came to

pay their bill. She embarrassed Stephen by embracing him in folded arms and kissing him on both cheeks, and she assured Sylvia that she was getting far too beautiful to be safe outside convent walls. To Mrs. Fleming, her *chère madame,* she confided her belief that Lloyd George was the illegitimate son of the Kaiser, which accounted for everything, including the cost of living in France, and she deplored the news that her *chère madame,* with her two adorable young people, was about to return to England, which assuredly was preparing for war against her country.

In spite of these preposterous ideas, expressed with great emotion and sincerity, and much heavy breathing and winks and nods, Stephen and Sylvia were delighted to see *Mère* Bidou again, and when they went up to their tiny rooms on the third floor, and saw the same holes in the carpets and the ink-stain on the wall where Stephen had flung his ink-pot at the head of an impudent waiter who had tried to kiss Sylvia, and the little wardrobe where they had kept their books, they had a feeling of sentiment and regret for the passing of that time.

It was Sylvia who expressed this feeling, with a hint of moisture in her eyes.

"Stephen, this place is haunted with our ghosts! The ghosts of you and me when we didn't know so much. Do you see yourself there, in knickerbockers, reading *La Belle Nivernaise* and *Tartarin de Tarascon?* And do you see me in short frocks and a pigtail, talking French to a doll called Nicolette? Lord! how I used to love that wax-faced thing, even when I had kissed all the paint off its cheeks! What a lot has happened since then! And how old we are getting! Is it possible that a very respectable gentleman has asked me to be his wife? Is it true that you and I are on our way to England, where you will probably fall in love with a noble lady and I shall go off the deep end with an impecunious peer? The past slips from us. The unknown beckons. O Life! O dreams!"

She talked nonsense, laughed at her own foolishness, but that night, before going to her bedroom, she flung her arms

round Stephen's neck and kissed him, and said, "Let's be good pals always, you and me!"

"Why not?" asked Stephen. "But I don't see the use of all this soppy kind of talk."

Yet when he was left alone, he too had the sense of being on the threshold of the unknown, and of being rather scared about it. He would be a stranger in England. And that father of his would be in the background, with strange relatives who would try to butt in. And anyhow he would have to find his job in life and face up to manhood. Rather a nuisance on the whole, and all very uncertain.

It was a perfectly smooth crossing to Dover, though poor old "Bluebeard" was as sick as a dog, and Mrs. Fleming complained of feeling "qualmy."

Sylvia gave a cry at the first sight of the white cliffs of England, and said, "All the same, I believe I shall hate it!" while Stephen felt his heart give a jolt. England! His own folk! The home of half the history he had read. The country of Charles Dickens, whom he adored.

His mother had wet eyes and a laughing face as she stepped on shore, clasping her handbag, and passport, and tickets.

"I feel like Mrs. Rip van Winkle!" she exclaimed. "I've forgotten my way about London, and the war has killed off all my friends—except a few. . . . *Porteur! Qu'est-ce que tu fais la?* Oh, Lord! I forgot! He speaks English!"

"England, Home, and Beauty!" said Sylvia, staring out of the carriage window. "It doesn't look as if it had gone to the dogs yet! And regard those adorable thatched cottages! And there's even a gleam of sunshine on the fields, though not more than a gleam. Good old England! I feel quite a little patriot! Britons never, never, never will be slaves! And for Heaven's sake, don't lose the passports, Mother, in case we get annoyed with it."

There was no gleam of sunshine as they drew near London, but rain drizzling down on the slushy pavements of squalid suburbs where lights were blazing in shop windows above the umbrellas of street crowds.

"Clapham," said Mrs. Fleming. "I once had a maid who

came from Clapham. She ran off with the butcher's young man and my pearl brooch."

"It looks like that kind of place," remarked Sylvia. "I think, on the whole, I prefer Monte Carlo."

"London!" cried Mrs. Fleming presently. "Victoria station, and all my unhallowed past crowding like ghosts about me!"

They stood on the platform, surrounded by luggage, porters, fellow-passengers, taxi-cabs.

"Well," said Sylvia, "it's not like Venice or Rome or Biarritz or Naples, but it's London all right, unless we got into the wrong train."

"My dear Helen," said a familiar voice. "A pleasant journey, I hope?"

It was Henry Carey, most faithful of friends.

Another voice gave a hearty guffaw.

"Hullo, Nell! It's ages since we met! So you've come back to this benighted country of out-of-works and income-tax! Rather foolish of you, isn't it? Where are the kids?"

It was Jack Rivington—"Uncle Jack," as Mrs. Fleming called him to her children—a handsome man, shabbily dressed, with a jolly, rakish look.

Sylvia clutched Stephen's arm.

"I feel hopelessly un-English!" she said.

XII

COLONEL FLEMING was charmed with Sylvia. She had already made a great difference in his life after those three or four visits to the Hôtel des Anglais, where she had come to meet him to settle up affairs and arrange to take her mother to England. She was a relief to that terrible sense of loneliness which had crept over him after his return to England, disgraced in public opinion because of that affair in the Punjab—"the massacre," they called it, though if he hadn't crushed rebellion ruthlessly all India would have been given over to flame and anarchy and bloody murder—and alarmed by the state of things in his own country.

He could not understand his own people. They bewildered him, he felt a stranger among them. During the war England had been magnificent, from all he had heard in India. Pessimist as he had been before that time because he had believed that the English people were becoming soft and luxury-loving, without discipline to keep their great heritage or faith to steel them to sacrifice, he had been amazed and overwhelmed by the spiritual rally of the nation, by the splendid courage of youth—from the slums as well as from the public schools—and by their loyalty to all those traditions of honour, duty and service to which his own soul had done homage always. Now, after the war, something seemed to have slipped in the spirit of the English people. They seemed to have fallen back into weakness and slackness and social anarchy. The labouring classes were always striking for higher wages or lounging about on the dole of idleness. They were bringing the country to ruin after their great victory. Everybody was out for pleasure and the avoidance of duty.

His own class, even, seemed to him weakly tolerant of sentimental and destructive ideas, pandering to the Labour Unions, to socialistic creeds, to all those "liberal ideas" with which he had no patience at all. Democracy! What an illu-

sion! What a fetish! He believed in ruling people for their own good, in strong government by men who had been trained to govern. What could all those poor little shopkeepers and boy-clerks and girl-typists and dwellers in mean streets know about the principles of government, or Imperial responsibilities, or relations with foreign powers? They merely echoed the parrot-cries of the popular Press which played on their ignorance, falsified facts, using foul means to drag down men who had served their country.

He had nothing but contempt for his cousin Burford—a pity such a weakling should have inherited the old title—who posed as an idealist and betrayed his own caste. He had had the impudence to denounce the Punjab affair in the House of Lords as a "lamentable incident," though he should have known better than most men that it was necessary for the peace and safety of India and all the white women there. Even some of the fellows in his old club—the East India Club—played about with dangerous ideas, and saw no harm in "broadening the basis of native rule." It had made the club rather distasteful to him, though a few of his old friends had had the decency to come up and say, "Well done, Fleming! You and Dyer have helped to save India."

The attitude of those other men sickened him, made him feel more lonely than he had thought possible in London. Of course the war had wiped out a lot of his old comrades. He missed their faces, found himself looking for them down Pall Mall, as in the old days when he was home on leave. Even London itself had changed, with a lot of new buildings which dwarfed the old quiet houses, and made the place look vulgar. The younger men were not so respectful. They did not call him "sir," as he used to do at their time of life to men of his years. They seemed to be exclusively interested in night-clubs and card-parties and motoring and golf. They criticised the higher command in the war, alluded to distinguished generals as "our old murderers," thought the Germans were not getting a fair deal.

At least, he had overheard one or two conversations like that and had taken upon himself on one occasion, in a public

restaurant, the unpleasant task of intervening. He had asked them if they had forgotten the word "loyalty," and one of them—obviously an ex-officer—had had the impudence to laugh and say, "Our idea of loyalty is rather broader than yours, perhaps. We don't believe in loyalty to damned stupidity and the tyranny of worn-out ideas." Those ideas were working in the mind of the younger crowd, and they made him shiver. England had not built up her Empire on that kind of stuff. And they made him feel lonely and out of date, an exile in his own country.

His mind had gone back to Helen. What was that woman doing, and where was she hiding with her children, who were also his children? For years he had been rather conscience-stricken about that boy and girl. But India had taken possession of him. He had been utterly absorbed in his duties. Time enough to look up those young people when he went home! Now he had come home—finished with India—and he craved for them, and realised with a kind of shock that they would not be children any more, but almost grown-up. He had found out their address from Helen's brother Jack—a harum-scarum sort of chap, but amusing and interesting and full of ideas—and it was that little villa near Monte Carlo.

The thought of Helen came back to him on the journey out—even before then—with a kind of obsession. He saw her beauty again as he had known it. He had never met another woman so beautiful as Helen, or so gay and alluring. A tragedy that she had been so weak, so lacking in loyalty, so vain and emotional and lawless. All the officers of his regiment had fallen in love with her, some in a comradely and chivalrous way, as the gentlemen they were, one in a dastardly way. He had suspected nothing, left her for months at a stretch, on special duty, asked too much of her in loyalty. Then when he found out that she was in love, or thought she was in love, with young Cardew, he played the part of Othello, with storms of passion which now seemed incredible, after years of self-control. He had frightened her to death, and of course made matters infinitely worse. Just played into the hands of a young

scoundrel. It had made a pretty scandal in India, and people marvelled at his coldness, his indifference, his hardness. How little they knew, those fools!

He had gone about for years with a bleeding heart and intolerable bitterness. That had passed from him, that bitterness. He had forgiven her long ago, and judged his own share of blame, which was not light. It was only pity that he felt for her now, and for himself a sense of life's tragedy, its irony, its injustice, its stupidity—as shown by that finish of his in India. Broken after all his service!

The sight of Helen in that crowd at Monte Carlo had touched him with painful emotion. She was so little changed. Still so amazingly young and pretty. When he had spoken to her in the tea-shop he must have seemed cold and hard, though he was intensely nervous and more shaken than he had realised at the time. An amazing meeting, after all those years! She was still his wife, according to the laws of God. Strange that she had never married again! She must have had many offers, many temptations. And yet she had given up her religion, as he had heard from old friends. Perhaps some relic of it had remained with her subconsciously, keeping her from another experiment of that kind. Then that tea with the boy and girl! How charming they had been. His heart had gone out to them. He had been very much tempted to tell them who he was, but it hadn't seemed fair before speaking to Helen.

Now he had seen Sylvia several times and had had long talks with her. Sometimes she was disturbingly like her mother, that little laugh of hers, that way of holding her head roguishly, so that he could hardly believe it was not the Helen he had known before her marriage, in the old house in Belgrave Square where she had lived with her people. But Sylvia seemed to him to be more frank, more truthful, without a touch of her mother's weakness. She scared him sometimes by her amazing frankness, by her complete absence of sentiment and illusion, although very young and innocent. It was a queer combination of knowledge and simplicity—the modern type of girlhood, he supposed—and her sense of humour, inherited from Helen,

perhaps, played about all her ideas of life, so that often he could not tell when she was teasing him or speaking with sincerity.

She had been perfectly businesslike in discussing her mother's affairs and future plans. She had collected all the unpaid bills and totted them up very neatly, and said, "There you are, Father. All that's going to cost you a pretty penny! But of course, as you want to resume parental relations, you must accept the responsibilities, I suppose."

He admired her for her loyalty to her mother. Never once did she allow him to utter a word of reproach, or self-excuse, or condemnation.

"She's the most adorable mother in the world," she said, "and any little mistake she may have made is entirely due to her love for Stephen and me. I want you to understand that, Father."

Once when he patted her hand and asked whether she knew anything about love between men and women, about which she had been laying down the law in a rather alarming way, she had frightened him by her answer.

"I'm beginning to be coveted," she said, audaciously. "An Italian count has already offered me a castle on the top of a crag if I will yield to his hopeless passion. Unfortunately, it has no water supply and no system of main drainage. And there's a young American who has a very nice furniture factory at Grand Rapids, wherever that may be. He has asked me to be his wife, and I'm inclined to think him over, unless I meet some more attractive youth."

Colonel Fleming had shown his fright by an immediate display of the white feather.

"Look here, my dear! Don't let any of those fellows capture you yet awhile, just as I'm beginning to realise I have a most desirable daughter. It would break my heart. And in any case, you're preposterously young for marriage—the most hazardous adventure in life."

Sylvia had laughed and relieved his mind.

"Don't be scared, Father. I've got to look after Mother and Stephen until they're settled in life, and they're both

very young and want a lot of attention. Besides, I'm not in any kind of a hurry."

"That's good," said Colonel Fleming. "I'm glad to hear it. I'm looking for your comradeship."

He had to restrain Sylvia's ideas about his wealth. It was when she suggested in an airy way that her mother might take a house for them somewhere facing Hyde Park, so that she and Stephen might do a little riding in the Row every morning. It would be very pleasant.

"Delightful," said Colonel Fleming, drily. "But far too expensive, my dear."

"Oh, but you're going to be generous, Father!" exclaimed Sylvia. "You've said many times that you don't want us to stint and scrape any more."

"Perfectly true. But I'm not a rich man. Far from it. All the money I have is what I've saved out of my pay, barring a few thousand pounds from my dear old father."

"Well," said Sylvia brightly, "a few thousand pounds will go a long way."

"Not very far," answered her father. "Hardly anywhere, looking at the price of things these days. Not that I want to be mean."

He had a suspicion that Sylvia thought he wanted to be mean, whereas at the mere sight of her he was tempted to be over-generous, extravagant beyond his means, so that he could win her friendship.

"Perhaps we can manage those riding lessons," he said. "I'd like to meet you in the Row and lift my hat to you and make the young fellows jealous of me."

"You shall," said Sylvia, graciously.

"But not a house facing the Park, my dear! Some little place off Knightsbridge. One of those little streets cutting down to Brompton Road. There will be only three of you, and a maid or two."

"Yes, poor old Madeleine," said Sylvia. "Where we go, she goes, though the thought of London fills her with terror, because Lloyd George lives there."

"My old house in Sussex will cost me a pretty penny. I've a good mind to sell it."

"What! The home of our ancestors?" cried Sylvia. "Not if I have anything to say about it, Father."

After three visits she seemed to have a good deal to say about her father's affairs, as he noted with amusement. He agreed not to sell it, if she promised to spend a week-end with him. She was particularly interested in a casual mention he made of his contemptible cousin, Burford.

"Do you mean to say I have an uncle in the House of Lords? Mother has kept it dark all this time?"

"Well, hardly an uncle," said Colonel Fleming, "and not much of a fellow, anyhow. He's my second cousin, and the fool of the family. He married that American woman, Elizabeth Herring of California, and uses her dollars for all sorts of fantastic schemes. Prohibition, Peace propaganda, to say nothing of supporting the Liberal party in their plans to ruin England."

"You're rather an autocrat, Father, aren't you?" asked Sylvia. "I should think you and Mussolini would have much in common."

It was one of those moments when he suspected that she was laughing up her sleeve at him, except that her sleeve was so short that he could see her pretty elbow.

"We could do with a Mussolini in England," he answered "I'd like to dose some of those Socialist rascals with castor oil and put the Fascisti to work on them."

"Referring back to Lord Burford," said Sylvia thoughtfully, "may I ask if there are any young Burfords about, somewhat of my own age? That would be quite amusing, and might brighten up life in England."

"There's one fellow," Colonel Fleming told her. "My cousin's cousin, Neville Lacey, and a gallant lad, judging from his record in the war. He lives near the old house in Sussex, so that I hope to see him now and then."

"Do!" said Sylvia. "Ask him to tea when I come down for the week-end. I'd like to know a good-looking cousin or two."

"He's not a bad-looking lad," said Colonel Fleming. "But any case it doesn't matter very much."

"Oh, it matters," observed Sylvia, judicially. "It makes just that little difference."

So they talked, and he thought her exquisite.

After her departure from Monte Carlo with Helen and Stephen he felt lonely again, and missed her dreadfully. But he had decided not to be too greedy at first for the company of Sylvia, and not to force the pace with Stephen, who held aloof from him. He would have to win their friendship gradually and not alarm Helen with the idea that he was going to break his word with her. He would be generous, not only in giving, up to the hilt of his income, but in not claiming. Helen had the first right to the children, after all her devotion—foolish and weak and reckless as she had been. He must be content with second place. Still, he felt lost without those visits from Sylvia, and after leaving Monte Carlo and getting back to London, he was glad to get a letter from her, reporting progress.

They had made a good deal of progress. Henry Carey had found them a "duck of a house," she wrote, in a place called Montpelier Square, not more than a few yards from Hyde Park, after all. It was absurdly cheap. Only two hundred a year. Unfortunately, a studio was impossible in that neighbourhood, and Stephen had taken one—or rather, Sylvia had taken one for him—in the King's Road, Chelsea. Rather slummy, but most amusing. It was only a hundred and fifty a year, and Stephen could sleep there if he liked, though of course he wouldn't, with such a mother and such a sister. He had already made friends with some nice young artists—at least they were very polite to her—and was beginning not to hate England with the ferocity which had spoilt things for them on his first arrival. Mr. Carey had been a perfect dear, as usual, and Uncle Jack, who was wonderfully amusing, had a great scheme which sounded rather thrilling, though it would need a little capital. It was for her mother to start a hat-shop in Bond Street, or somewhere. Many society people, including Russian princesses, were doing the same thing, and making lots of money. However, that could be discussed later.

"Meanwhile," wrote Sylvia, "I shall be delighted if you

will take me out to tea—there's a very nice place at the corner of Bond Street—when we'll discuss future plans, with a little high finance, between the chocolate éclairs.

"I am,

"Your most obedient, obliged, and dutiful daughter,

"SYLVIA FLEMING.

"P.S.—I have received several letters from my American of Grand Rapids, U.S.A. All of them arrived by the same mail. But you needn't be alarmed. I'm getting fond of London."

Colonel Fleming put this letter in his breast-pocket, after kissing it behind the shelter of *The Morning Post*, as he sat deep in a club chair. Then he added up a few figures; £200 plus £150. With running expenses, the house in Montpelier Square and the studio in Chelsea would knock rather a hole in his little income. He would have to economise down in the country. All the same, he would like to give Sylvia those riding lessons, and buy her some pretty things now and then. He went out of the club and lingered outside a jeweller's shop in St. James's Street. There was rather a nice little bracelet of rolled gold, with snakes' heads. It would look good round Sylvia's dainty wrist. He went in and bought it, though it was rather more expensive than he had imagined. He came out of the shop with a jaunty air, trying to look as if he hadn't bought anything. He felt absurdly like himself—was it a thousand years ago?—when he had gone into this same shop and bought an engagement ring for Helen. The beginning of his tragedy!

XIII

LONDON had been rather appalling to Sylvia and Stephen on first acquaintance—for it amounted to that, as they had been too young to remember their early childhood in the Cromwell Road, where they had lived with their mother when she left India. After the Riviera, with its brilliant sunshine and flowers in full bloom, the darkness and wetness and coldness of London in March struck them with dismay. Apart from the weather, which was "all that there is of the most abominable," as Sylvia remarked in her Frenchified way, the ugliness and dreariness of London when observed in superficial comparison with Paris—the Place de la Concorde, the Tuileries Gardens!—seemed to them positively terrifying.

"The place is like a prison," growled Stephen. "All these mean streets, with their rows of door-knockers and peeling plaster and beetle-ridden basements"—he was speaking of the little streets off the Brompton Road, where they went to look for houses—"are only one damned thing after another. Life seems shut up in this infernal city. Everybody seems to be hiding from everybody else. Why, there's not even a café with an open-air terrace. It's impossible to sit down anywhere and watch the passers-by. Not that I want to watch them. They've all got colds in the head and look soured with life. No wonder, in such a climate!"

That was his first impression of the city he had longed to see, and of the people he had wanted to know because they were his own.

Sylvia agreed with him, though she decided to suspend judgment.

"I'm afraid Mother has been looking back at things through rose-coloured glasses," she said. "She was always talking of London as though it were Paradise. I'm bound to admit that at first sight it looks to me like a modern version of Dante's "Inferno." People walk about like

poor damned souls shrinking from the bite of conscience, or this dreadful east wind. And, as you say, dear Stephen, they look afraid of each other, or afraid of the income-tax collector, or life, or something. They've no openness of heart, it appears. They're enclosed by inhibitions. It's impossible to imagine one of these Londoners coming to sing Romeo to my Juliet outside the front door, like dear little Goldoni. One never hears anybody singing in the streets, and the only bright sound made in this city of despair is the music made by ex-soldiers in the Great War, without arms or legs, poor darlings."

"It's a disgrace to England," said Stephen, who hated the sight of those wounded men shaking their collecting-boxes in the faces of the passers-by. "One doesn't see that sort of thing in France. Hasn't this country got any pride? Is that how they reward their heroes?"

"Perhaps the heroes prefer that way of life," answered Sylvia hopefully. "They may make a lot of money that way. Anyway, they lure the little sixpences out of my poor pocket."

Not even Bond Street lived up to the reputation built in Sylvia's mind by listening to its glories from her mother, who had said that the rue de la Paix was a mean street with very poor shops compared with those in dear old Bond Street. She had been splashed with mud from passing taxis, and the rain dripped down her neck from the spokes of her umbrella, and Bond Street seemed to her much overrated as the centre of the world's shopping. She much preferred Harrod's in the Brompton Road. That certainly was a shop, and it was nice and warm inside, and it was a wonderful thing to be warm in England. Why, she was positively blue with cold, and felt as if her very heart were frozen by the bleak, unfriendly atmosphere of that city which had been honoured by her birth.

"Mother," she protested, "you've been making up fairy-tales about this city of yours. It's positively squalid. I never saw such miserable crowds of unessential people in such surroundings of abominable architecture. Give me Paris, and give me life!"

"You wait a bit," answered her mother. "London grows on you like a disease. I'm revelling again in these wet, grey skies and slushy streets. I feel as though I want to hug the old place with its seven million people, in one embrace."

"Well, if I were you I'd restrain myself," was Sylvia's advice. "As for growing on me, I feel already as though its smuts were permanent. No amount of washing will restore that schoolgirl complexion of mine."

And yet London "grew" on Sylvia. Imperceptibly she found herself getting used to it, and then liking it, and then discovering new glories in it. The first gleam of spring sunshine made all the difference. The gloom lifted from it, and from the spirit of its people. There were wonderful effects of light up the long vistas of the streets. There was something vital and exhilarating in that March wind tearing round the corners, whipping her cheeks on the top of an omnibus from Piccadilly to the Bank. And that tide of traffic, that roar of a great life around her, was rather wonderful, she thought. The music of Paris had a squeaky note compared with the deep murmur of these multitudes. There was something solid and strong about old London. It was not built for prettiness. It was ugly. But it wasn't mean.

She heard Stephen draw his breath at the first sight of St. Paul's from the top of that omnibus, but he only expressed his admiration by saying in a casual way, "Not a bad old dome. Wren's, you know. After the Great Fire"; as though she didn't know perfectly well. On the same afternoon they explored Westminster Abbey, and Sylvia piped her eye a moment at the thought of all the great ghosts there, and Stephen stood silently for a while by the grave of the Unknown Soldier, thinking furiously, with a frown on his face.

"From Edward the Confessor to the Great War," he said when he came out. "Well, it's worth coming to London for."

He went alone to the National Gallery, and came back less hostile to London, and he had something good to say about Waterloo Bridge, and after that sloped about back streets and through old squares and in long treks citywards, when

he went into old churches, and even as far as the London Docks, until one day he came back and sat on Sylvia's bed —she had been washing her hair and liked him to talk to her—and made a kind of apology for all the hard things he had said about London.

"It's a great place in its grim old way," he said. "I don't mean in size, but in a funny human way, and history and all that. I want to go on exploring, but I'll never get to the end of it. Those Docks are a world in themselves, with pictures just shouting out to be done—bits of old wharves, great ships, every kind of craft from the other end of the world. One day I'll have a go at them. Then all those city churches—I've been reading up their history and looking at old tombs and things. But what I like best are the slum places and all the queer people in them. Wonderful types everywhere, if one looks at them in the right way. I'd like to know how they live and what they're thinking about. Secretive, most of them, I should say. I went into a pub and tried to talk to some seamen—there was one fellow wearing ear-rings—but they took me for a toff and wouldn't say a word. I made a sketch of him afterwards, and it came rather well."

"So London's growing on you!" said Sylvia slyly. "That London which you cursed so horribly in French and Italian."

Stephen thrust his hands through his reddish hair.

"I suppose it's in my blood," he remarked. "A Frenchman would think it the vilest place on earth. But it's not uninteresting."

It was certainly amusing furnishing the small house in Montpelier Square, regardless of expense, because "the Colonel," as Sylvia called her father sometimes, with a sense of humour which was not quite apparent—perhaps she was thinking of all those retired colonels she had seen in Florence and the Riviera—had distinctly told her that she could do the thing nicely and send him in the bills. "You deserve to have a pretty home," he had said in his chivalrous way.

Well, it was easy, she found, when one had *carte blanche*

like that, and she and her mother had great adventures in search of old English furniture—saddle-back chairs, Jacobean tables, Welsh dressers, a few bits of Chippendale, a perfectly gorgeous writing-desk for herself, with funny little handles to the drawers and a secret cupboard—though she had one moment of dreadful doubt, followed by a squeal of laughter, when the idea jumped into her head that all these things might have been imported from Grand Rapids. What had put that idea into her head, perhaps, was another letter from Edward Hillier. That was the fourth since his return to America. They were nice, interesting, serious letters, touching on such subjects as Anglo-American friendship—he found a very friendly attitude towards England—and the effects of Prohibition on social life, not altogether good, though personally he thought the general result justified the experiment, and the refusal of the United States to enter the League of Nations, with the underlying reasons, and other subjects of international interest.

She could hardly call them love-letters. Passion did not breathe out of them. There were no romantic protestations, nor even any pleasant sentimental expressions which might have been expected from a young man who had invited her to be his wife, and to whom she had yielded her cheek for a parting kiss. They were kind, chatty, rather high-brow letters which might have been written by a university professor to one of his favourite students. But the rapid sequence of them suggested that she was still very much in his thoughts, and that at least was flattering. One phrase in the last letter was rather exciting. "It is just possible," wrote Mr. Edward Hillier, "that I may come to England for a week or two before the Fall—perhaps quite soon indeed. A business trip with which I hope to combine a very great pleasure—the chance of seeing you again."

For a moment or two Sylvia had puzzled over that word "Fall." Could he possibly mean the Decline and Fall of the British Empire, or the Fall of Man, or anything of that kind? Stephen, however, to whom she put the ques-

tion, told her that it was the American word for autumn, which was reassuring.

She astonished the salesman of the furniture department in Harrod's by asking him abruptly whether a Sheraton table he was showing her had by any chance come from Grand Rapids. He had laughed so heartily that Mrs. Fleming was scandalised and rebuked Sylvia for being too familiar with strangers, and especially with shop-walkers. It was rather like the pot calling the kettle black.

Mrs. Fleming enjoyed this house-furnishing even more than Sylvia. Her special joy was choosing old-fashioned chintzes and flowered brocades for the curtains and beds, and Persian rugs for the floors, which were going to be stained and polished. She was ruthless in turning out the shop before making her choice, and could never quite make up her mind which thing she liked best of all those she had put on one side as almost exactly right. It was always Sylvia who settled the matter finally, when the patience of the shop assistants was at breaking-point.

"It's such a relief," she said, "to know that I haven't to worry my head off to find the money for all these precious things. No more need of Italian lessons to English schoolgirls, or music lessons to French *demoiselles*. None of that dreadful feeling of living on the edge of a precipice over which I might pop at any time, with you and Stephen."

She took for granted, in her careless, humorous way, that "the Colonel"—she had adopted Sylvia's nickname for the husband from whom she had been separated so long—had a bottomless purse entirely at the disposal of the family he had so shamefully neglected. Sylvia, who had a sense of fair play, though very little knowledge of money values, vetoed certain purchases which she considered were unnecessarily extravagant. It was her argument, for instance, which substituted an upright piano by an unknown maker for a Bechstein Grand on which Mrs. Fleming had set her heart.

"Father said, 'Do things nicely,'" she explained, "but that didn't mean buying everything that takes one's fancy. He's not a millionaire, after all."

"Oh, he's been saving for twenty years," said Mrs. Fleming. "It will do him good to spend a bit. He owes it to you, my dear."

"Well, I'm going to play fair by the Colonel," said Sylvia. "And, anyhow, an upright will fit into that corner of the little drawing-room."

When all was bought and moved in, and arranged to the best advantage by three people with artistic taste which clashed at times—Stephen and Sylvia accused their mother of Early Victorian notions—the small house in Montpelier Square was a gem of beauty and comfort which went a long way in reconciling Sylvia to London life. Henry Carey came to help in hanging up the pictures, like the faithful friend he was, and bought vases (and flowers to fill them), and was not really very helpful, being awkward with hammer and nails, but so kind and courteous and so delighted to see Helen in London again, and so funny and old-fashioned with his monocle and his white spats and his air of shabby gentility that even Mrs. Fleming hadn't the heart to bully him when he broke a little shepherdess in Dresden china by dropping the hammer on her head, while Sylvia eased his distress by assuring him that without his labours they would never have got straight.

Then there was Uncle Jack, a constant source of amusement to Sylvia—until he became rather tiresome—and of joy to her mother. Never by any chance did Uncle Jack lift his hand to do a stroke of work, but he was prodigal of advice and criticism, told humourous anecdotes of life in the Australian bush, on Californian fruit-farms, as a bartender in a mining camp in Mexico, and as a gunner major in the Great war, where he had lost his left arm.

He was a tall, florid man, two years older than Mrs. Fleming and rather like her, in spite of his bronzed skin and black moustache. He generally stood with his back to the fire-place, keeping the heat from everybody else, with one hand in a trouser pocket and his empty sleeve in his jacket pocket, while he chewed the stump of a cigar and talked continually. He had free and liberal views on life, and did not hesitate to declare himself a bit of a Bolshevik.

"Modern civilisation is all wrong," he proclaimed one afternoon, watching his sister fasten up the curtains, while Stephen was staining the floor boards and Sylvia was doing some needlework. "Take this little home that you're making so pretty. All wrong, Helen. Utterly ridiculous, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I do mind, Jack. What's the matter with it?"

Uncle Jack made a sweep with his only hand.

"These little English homes ought to be smudged out of existence by some impatient and divine gesture. Blotted out. They're simply cupboards full of snob ideas, caste prejudices, pretentious humbug, false and vicious allegiance to a decadent and parasitical luxury. That's the curse of this old country, everybody shutting themselves up in little cubby-holes, having nothing to do with their neighbours, despising them if they happen to be poor or not quite genteel, not caring a curse for all the starving masses, the out-of-works, the down-and-outs. What you are doing in this ridiculous dolls'-house—far too expensive in my opinion—is what millions of other people are doing in their rotten little houses —barricading themselves against the realities of life—the eternal verities, the simplicities of the honest human soul face to face with the sky and the soil—by chintz curtains, rosewood pianos, Dresden china ornaments—one of them broken, thank God!—and all the paraphernalia of so-called refinement and civilisation. If I had my way as an autocrat, I'd blow London to bits with high-explosive fire."

"Rubbish, Jack!" said Mrs. Fleming. "What do you want us to do? Camp out in gipsy tents in the middle of Trafalgar Square?"

Uncle Jack answered with amiable ferocity.

"Trafalgar Square! By Jove, Helen, you've just clinched my argument. I'd haul old Nelson down from his column.—Why do we want to commemorate war between England and France, or any damned war?—and make the unemployed dig up the paving-stones and grow potatoes. What we want to do is to get men back to the soil. Back to simplicity and the primitive life. Instead of which we educate them with rubbishly ideas, teach them discontent,

and allow them to stand in Trafalgar Square talking claptrap about the right of the working-classes to wear black coats and live like gentlemen. I'd turn the machine-gun on them if I had half-an-hour's authority."

"But I thought you were a democrat, Uncle?" remarked Sylvia, looking up from her needlework. "A little while ago you said you were a bit of a Bolshevik."

"So I am," said her uncle sternly. "But I don't believe in a black-coated democracy apeing gentility with all its vices. I believe in the fellow who digs the earth, the pioneer in the primeval forest, the strong silent man who puts up a fight against the hardship of nature in the wide spaces of the world. Thank heaven I've done so myself—in Australia, Canada, Mexico, God knows where."

"It doesn't seem to have done you much good, Jack," remarked Mrs. Fleming with her enjoyable laugh. "As for being a strong, silent man, I believe you were born talking. Probably argued with poor mother about the inefficiency of your nurse."

Jack Rivington was not abashed by that challenge.

"I want to save you people from the doom that is overtaking England, as sure as fate," he said, gloomily. "My advice to you all is to clear out before the almighty smash comes. What's the use of Stephen going in for art? Art! Who's going to buy his pictures? What people want is potatoes, not pictures. Pigs, not paint. I recommend him to go and grow them, on a good soil,—somewhere in Alberta. As for Sylvia, what is *her* prospect? Matrimony with a second-class clerk in the Civil Service, with nerves, weak eyes, and round shoulders. A little villa somewhere in Wimbledon! Worse still, marriage with some impecunious younger son of a diseased and decadent aristocrat, lamenting the good old days and not doing a damn thing to create good new days. What life for a pretty young woman! Why not send her out to New Zealand to marry some husky fellow who would love her with a strong man's love, and beat her if she gave him too much of her tongue? Primitive, honest, simple sincere stuff of life, instead of all this

preparation for make-believe gentility hiding behind chintz curtains."

So Uncle Jack talked while others worked, and he was surprised and hurt when his remarks were received with cascades of laughter from Sylvia and derision from his sister Helen. Still, he was good company, and brought what Sylvia called the human note into the little house in Montpelier Square. It was Jack Rivington who, failing in his proposal to send them all flying to the furthest ends of the earth in search of the simple life, suggested a millinery establishment in Bond Street as the next-best way of avoiding a parasitical existence. There were pots of money in the idea, he asserted, and his sister, with her good taste and energy, and Sylvia, with her pretty face and elegant figure, would certainly attract the best class of customers. He suggested that the Colonel should be asked to "cough up" a little capital and set the thing going. He would undertake the business end of it and do the travelling round the wholesale firms. He would only want a small salary and a fair commission.

"It's certainly an idea, Helen," said Henry Carey, who had a high opinion of Jack Rivington's business genius and audacity, though he trembled at the revolutionary nature of some of his opinions, which he took seriously.

Mrs. Fleming also thought it was an idea less ridiculous than most of her brother's. It appealed to her sense of adventure. It was impossible, as she said, for a woman of her temperament to sit with idle hands in Montpelier Square, with nothing in the world to do except look out of the windows and watch old ladies take their pet dogs for a little walk.

She discussed the matter privately with Sylvia and asked her to put the matter before "the old man," as she sometimes called Colonel Fleming.

"It might save him a lot of money," she suggested. "If I made a good thing out of it he needn't make us such an allowance. I'm bound to say I should feel more independent. It's rather humiliating to feel like a bondswoman after all these years of liberty.

"It has its compensations, Mother," said Sylvia. "And, after all, he is your husband, you know, strange as it may appear."

She agreed to put the matter before her father when she made her first visit to his house in the country, the following week-end.

XIV

COLONEL FLEMING'S house in Sussex, not far from the Surrey border, was a small place begun in the reign of Charles II. and added to and altered in succeeding reigns, until poverty stopped all building operations and left it an architectural patchwork, ivy-covered, rather dark because of the big trees round it, but pleasant to the eye because of its gables and casement windows and odd, rambling shape. It stood above a velvet lawn and stone terrace leading down to rather marshy ground through which a stream wandered, with an orchard beyond and a fruit garden sheltered by a high brick wall. Not a big house. Not one of those great estates of England put up for sale now by old families unable to support them after a costly war and its paralysing taxes, but one of those old English houses in which the country gentry lived very comfortably and privately through quiet centuries, with half a dozen servants, sufficient gardeners to keep the grounds tidy, a few horses in the stables, a carriage and pair for visiting the neighbours, and a pride and tradition which were always at the service of the country when it needed loyal and courageous gentlemen for any little war.

The Flemings had fought on the side of the Stuarts, had gone back to the old Catholic faith, after a temporary lapse, and had preserved an unbroken line of soldiers since Marlborough's time, when a Colonel Fleming had commanded a squadron of light horse at Oudenarde and Malplaquet, and in other great battles. The present Colonel Fleming was proud of those forebears of his, and liked to see their portraits on the walls and their crest and motto over the stone fire-place in the dining-room with its timbered ceiling. *Semper Fidelis.* Yes, they had been loyal to their faith, to their King, to their country, and to their class. That had been his own guiding light. Loyalty. Fidelity to the old ideas of duty and service—to the old code—to that

spiritual heritage which had come to him at birth in this old house, out of its timbers, out of its portraits of ruddy-faced men in funny old uniforms, out of its dust.

They had come back to this house after campaigns in foreign countries, from service in India like himself, and not one of them had returned richer than he had gone out, or with any worldly reward for duty done. They had just come back quietly to live the life of simple country gentlemen, to potter about these walled gardens, to take their place in the county as crusted old Tories, rather isolated from their neighbours because of their religion, but respected, feared by poachers, gipsies and lawless fellows, and loved by good women who became the mothers of more soldiers. That was the family history of the Flemings, and not a bad one, though commonplace enough, and broken now because of a tragedy of marriage, Helen's flight, Colonel Fleming's loneliness, that boy and girl in London, which had spoiled the family tradition and taken the life out of the old house.

Not that it was deserted or falling into ruin. Colonel Fleming's two sisters had kept the place in good repair since their elder brother's death, and as they were both great gardeners and good housekeepers, everything was in order and very neat and trim when the Colonel came back from India. He was pleased with them for that, and had tried to look cheerful and take an interest in their plans for a new rock-garden.

But all the time he had been haunted by the thought of Helen. They had spent their honeymoon here, when his brother had been away in Egypt. Her laughter had rung out in this old house. He remembered her as she had looked one day when she had come up the pergola in a white frock, with a rose at her breast. He had thought her the most exquisite of God's women, the most lovely. They had had a month of absolute joy, and he remembered her as she was then, so young, to gay, so brimming with love for him. What a hideous thought that he should be coming home without a wife, without his children, and in disgrace after all his service. He had a sharp reminder of public

opinion before he had reached home, from a group of young louts lounging about the station-yard. They had overheard his talk with the station-master, who had greeted him respectfully after the mention of his name.

He was conscious of their hostile glances, heard their remarks as he was arranging about his luggage.

"Colonel Fleming! . . . I wonder he has the face to show himself. . . ." . . . "Didn't you read about him in the papers?" . . . "Oh Lord, yes! . . . the fellow that massacred all them Indians . . ." "Yes. Shot 'em down with machine-guns. Men and women. Ought to be hanged, in my opinion." . . . "That's right. One of them reactionaries." . . . "Well, wait till we get a Labour government. That'll teach 'em." . . . "Ah! Or a nice little revolution. That would get rid of some of them swine!"

Sussex men! Ex-soldiers in the Great War! Was that how they were talking among themselves? It was a pretty revelation of the change that had happened since his absence from England—and since that war in which the men had been so wonderful. Bolshevism was at the root of it. Some poison—foreign-made—was at work in the minds of working-men. Colonel Fleming had walked up to his house with a grim look on his face. There was a coldness in his heart hardly to be warmed by the greetings of his two sisters. And even one of them—Anne, the elder of the two—looked frightened of him, as though conscious of that hardness in his face which he tried to soften.

"Welcome back, Dick," she said rather timidly. "You'll find the place just the same, after all these years. A little older, that's all, like all of us."

Yes, he was rather shocked by the way in which these sisters of his had aged. Anne's hair was almost white, and she had a worn look, as though life had been rather hard to her. He remembered that she had been a nurse all through the war, somewhere in France. Perhaps that accounted for it. She must have seen some fearful sights.

Elizabeth had put on flesh. She was a square-built woman, and he noticed that she had cut her hair short like a man's,

and wore a short skirt and big boots. She was more cheerful than Anne, and had a blunt, amusing way of speech.

"I expect you'll find us a nuisance, Dick. Two old maids, all crotchets and tempers! I shall probably quarrel with you. I've strong ideas about everything, and I expect you're just as self-willed as ever. Anne and I never agree about anything. She's a pacifist, and believes in letting off the Germans and being good and kind to everybody, including Labour leaders and the lazy unemployed. I'm a Die-Hard, and rather a dragon in my way. I'd hang Ramsay MacDonald and his gang on high trees, starve the unemployed until they got some work to do, and keep the Germans squealing, with their necks under an iron heel. Now you know where we stand!—Have some tea, or will you come round the grounds first and see how those two gardeners of ours are letting the place go to seed?"

Secretly Colonel Fleming found those two sisters of his rather trying at times, though he liked to have them about the house, which otherwise would have been intolerable with his sense of loneliness. Elizabeth's intolerance was harder, even, than his own—and he acknowledged to himself that tolerance did not come easy to him. Nor could he quite believe her alarming stories of a Bolshevik conspiracy led by international Jews, including two very distinguished representatives in England, to overthrow English society and bring down the British Empire. Grave as he considered the state of things to be, he could not bring himself to believe that the English people in the mass would allow themselves to be destroyed by a foreign conspiracy.

As for Anne, he was frankly scared of her, and was inclined to think that she was mad. It was almost incredible that a woman of the Fleming family should be such an out-and-out pacifist and consider war, even in self-defence, a crime against humanity. Indeed it was an heretical doctrine, which he could not reconcile with her very great devotion. She belonged to all sorts of ridiculous leagues of peace, and had the simplicity to ask him to join their committees and subscribe to their funds. Worst of all—so deeply annoying to him that he lost his temper with her one

night—she actually belonged to a society called The Friends of India, composed of seditious young Indian students in Bloomsbury, headed with one or two names with which he was only too familiar, owing to the trouble they had given to the government of India.

He had quite a scene with her after dinner one night, when Elizabeth had gone out to play bridge at one of the neighbouring houses. It was when she spoke to him "more in sorrow than in anger," as she put it, about that tragic affair in the Punjab which had wrecked his career.

"My dear Dick," she said, "how could you do it? Shoot down all those poor natives!"

"They were rebels," he answered quietly, trying to be patient with her.

"And women!" she said. "The papers declared that there were women in the crowd."

His face flushed in spite of him.

"Do you think I like shooting women?" he asked. "Don't you understand? The whole town was foaming with revolt. In spite of my warnings they assembled for seditious speeches and broke into open rioting, pillaging, murder. They had already killed several English citizens before I gave the order to fire. It was the Dyer business all over again. Any weakness on my part would have meant hauling down the British flag and the wholesale murder of white women. It might have meant mutiny from one end of India to the other. They needed a stern lesson. It was my duty to give it to them. Do you imagine I gave those orders lightly, or in hot blood, or without most desperate necessity?"

"But, Dick," said Anne, "surely you could have been less ruthless, more merciful? Surely you could have given them another warning?"

He lost his patience with her.

"Haven't I told you that I *had* warned them? The time was past for that. What's the use of warning to people mad with fanaticism, crying out for blood, with murder in their hearts? Don't talk like a fool, Anne, for God's sake!"

"It's for God's sake that I talk as I do," she answered.

"We've no right to hold India by such means as that. It's not according to the spirit of liberty for which so many of our young men died—I saw many of them die, Dick—and it's not according to the spirit of Christianity. When you kissed me the other day, after your home-coming, I shrank a little from your touch, Dick. There's blood on your hands. The blood of innocent men and women. Only prayer can ever wash that out. I feel bound to tell you."

Colonel Fleming had a moment's rage when he decided to clear her out of his house. All the bitterness he had felt at the attacks upon him in the English Press, in the House of Commons, and even in the House of Lords, surged up into his brain at this revelation by his own sister, under his own roof. Then he closed down his rage with that habit of iron self-control to which he had schooled himself for years. He answered gently, even with a fair imitation of amusement:

"All right, Anne. You go on praying for me. I daresay it will do me good. Only, I beg of you not to get mixed up with a gang of seditious rascals who, if they had their way, will let loose hell in India so that civilisation will be staggered by anarchy and bloody murder among three hundred million people. What happened in Russia will be nothing to it."

He declined to discuss the matter further with her, and enquired whether the chrysanthemums were likely to do well. But that night, in his own room, his bitterness returned. His name would go down to history as a murderer, as a man who had shot down women as well as men in cold blood. He, of all men, who had always been chivalrous, merciful as well as just, many times. His own sister thought him a cruel fellow, though he was conscious of a strain of weakness which had sometimes crossed his sense of duty, even in private life. He had been weak with Helen, allowing her to keep the children all that time, for fear of hurting her. That wasn't cruelty or lack of chivalry. He wanted to be generous as far as he could possibly afford it. Generous in self-denial, generous in making them happy without any selfish claims upon them.

Yet perhaps, whatever he did, they would think him hard and mean. It was the mask he wore, his incurable shyness, his dislike of emotion, and his reputation as a hard fellow. Hard! Why, even that child Sylvia could twist him round her little finger, if she only wanted to, and underneath his mask of severity he was a confirmed sentimentalist, if the truth were told! He was looking forward to Sylvia's visit to the old place like a lover waiting for his sweetheart!

He fussed about the house, seeing that everything was ready for her, rather unnecessarily, as Elizabeth told him bluntly but good-humouredly, and he put some daffodils on the dressing-table of the bedroom which he had chosen for her because it caught the early morning sun and looked out to the lawn and flower-garden. He also consulted Elizabeth about the food, and suggested that the cook should be asked to make some rather special dishes of a fancy kind.

"It strikes me, Dick," said Elizabeth, "that you're going to make a fool of yourself over that child. If she's anything like her mother, she's probably vain enough already. Anyhow, I've very little use for the younger generation—especially the female side of it. A good whipping now and then would do most of them a lot of good. They're too stuck up with themselves, without the least respect for their elders, and no more sense of morals than Persian kittens."

"You'll like Sylvia," said Colonel Fleming.

He shirked Elizabeth's questions about "that woman," by which she meant Helen, and only mentioned that he had seen her for a few minutes in Monte Carlo in order to arrange about the children's future.

Elizabeth thought it would have been far better to have arranged the matter through a solicitor, and expressed her opinion bluntly, as usual.

"That woman will make your life unbearable again if you give her the slightest rope. She's a thoroughly immoral creature, and she'll just make use of her children to get money out of you. I know her type."

"She's not mercenary," said Colonel Fleming. "She wouldn't take a penny from me all these years. In any case,

Elizabeth, I prefer not to discuss her. And I hope you'll be kind to Sylvia."

"It depends," answered Elizabeth, in a non-committal way. "If she's one of those conceited little minxes—flappers, they call them—who walk about with their noses in the air, as though the world were made for them, I shall probably be very rude and extremely unkind. I can't bear them. They annoy me intensely."

"You'll like Sylvia," said Colonel Fleming again. "She's charming. And, anyhow, she's my daughter."

But he felt uneasy about this plain-spoken sister of his. With regard to Anne he had no such misgivings. She was kind to every one, except when they shot down rebels and did justice on murderers!

He decided to invite a few friends to meet Sylvia on the afternoon of her arrival. He would like to show her off to some of his old cronies in the neighbourhood. Then there was that young relative of his, his cousin Burford's cousin, young Neville Lacey. She had expressed a wish to see him —her "sort of cousin," as she called him. It was natural that she should like to see some one of her own age. He wrote a note to the boy, asking him to spend the week-end. That would cheer things up for the girl, and if Elizabeth did happen to be rude to Sylvia, Neville's conversation would ease the situation. He hoped the weather would be fine. A little gleam of sunshine made all the difference to the look of the house and its walled gardens, and he wanted Sylvia to get a good impression of the place which meant so much to him.

"They think me hard!" he said to himself as he dressed himself on the morning that Sylvia was arriving by the mid-day train. "I'm nothing but a sentimentalist. That little daughter of mine seems the most important thing in the world."

He put a flower in his buttonhole when he went to meet her.

XV

SYLVIA's visit was a success on the whole, with a few perilous moments mainly due to Aunt Elizabeth. She arrived in a fawn-coloured frock and a little three-cornered hat with a blue cockade, looking very merry and bright, and rather more "grown-up" than her father had yet seen her—an elegant young lady, as he thought, thoroughly self-possessed, and ready to be pleased.

She was pleased with her father, and liked that flower in his buttonhole and his light-grey suit, and was kind enough to tell him so.

"You're looking ten years younger than when I saw you last, Father. It seems as though country air were good for you."

He was glad she thought so, but gave the real reason.

"It's the pleasure of seeing you, my dear."

He gave her a warning about her aunts, and especially about Aunt Elizabeth. He explained that she was alarming in her ways of speech, but a thoroughly kind-hearted woman. Aunt Anne, he said, was certainly mad, being a fanatical pacifist—probably the war had shattered her nerves—but a sweet, charitable soul and intensely religious.

"Well, I shall have to be very nice to Aunt Elizabeth," said Sylvia. "You might give me a nudge now and then, Father, if I happen to say the wrong thing. I generally do."

"How's Stephen?" asked Colonel Fleming.

From Sylvia's account it seemed that Stephen was learning a good deal about life and liked it rather more than she had expected. He had chummed up to a young artist who had a studio next door to his, and they explored London together and talked on every subject between heaven and earth, but mostly on art and politics. As he was the son of a Labour M.P., Mr. William Swinton of Battersea, he seemed to know a good deal about the political situation, and

especially about the life of the working classes, with whom he had a great deal of sympathy.

"Good heavens!" said Colonel Fleming. "That sounds to me very dangerous. I hope Stephen won't get bitten with Bolshevistic ideas."

Sylvia thought not. Sydney Swinton, the young artist—he did black-and-white drawings for the cheap magazines—was a nice, simple kind of youth, thoroughly well-educated and very musical. He played the piano like an angel and seemed to like playing her accompaniments to Italian opera.

"Very nice of him!" remarked Colonel Fleming drily. "But what about his politics?"

Sylvia did not think politics mattered very much, so long as people were nice, and had a sense of humour. Sydney Swinton hadn't much sense of humour, certainly, but there was another artist, on the other side of the passage, who was very amusing. That was a young man named Frank Lawton. He was extremely poor and seemed to live mostly on kippered-herrings and strong tea, but he was extraordinarily good on the banjo, and was also a very good mimic who could give the most wonderful imitations of the late Queen Victoria and other historical characters.

"Well, it seems to me that Stephen is keeping very queer company," said Colonel Fleming. "I hope it will work out all right. He's at a dangerous age just now, when it's easy to adopt the wrong ideas."

Sylvia was not alarmed about Stephen. He had his head screwed on tight, and he was devoted to his mother and sister. Also Sylvia kept her eye on him. Of course, later on he might go off the deep end about some girl or other, and in Sylvia's opinion, if Stephen ever did make a plunge into love, he would go very deep indeed, being of so sensitive a character underneath his pose of strength.

"Ah!" said Colonel Fleming. "I shouldn't wonder. But fortunately he's much too young for that kind of thing. Eighteen and a bit. Good heavens!"

Sylvia remarked that they began younger nowadays. Still, Stephen would have to get a bit older before they need worry.

She gave a slight sketch of the family life in Montpelier Square, including characters of Uncle Jack and Mr. Carey, and friends and relatives of her mother who kept dropping in.

"Very pleasant people," she observed, "but rather old-fashioned and deplorably poor. The conversation about the good old times before the war is apt to get tedious. However, Mother enjoys it, and I like to see her happy."

"Your mother had many admirers in the old days," said Colonel Fleming. "And I suppose she still likes admiration."

He spoke rather bitterly, and then changed the subject of conversation abruptly. It was easy to do so, for they had arrived at the house and Aunt Elizabeth and Aunt Anne stood in the porch to greet them.

Sylvia, in her slightly foreign way, kissed the two ladies on both cheeks and said she was delighted to make their acquaintance, and she pretended not to notice later that Aunt Elizabeth rubbed her cheek with her gardening gloves, as though she found those kisses distasteful and un-English.

"I'm glad to see you haven't brought a mass of luggage, anyhow," she said, with forced cordiality. "Most young girls of to-day seem to think it's necessary to bring a cartload for a week-end visit. Nonsense, I call it! Well, you had better come and have a look at your room, especially as you'll want to powder your nose, I suppose. What is the exact idea of you young things plastering your noses with powder I have not yet discovered. I wash my face three times a day, and leave it at that."

"In warm climates a little powder is almost necessary, Aunt," said Sylvia, persuasively. "Of course in England it's rather different. Especially in the country."

As a matter of fact, she had intended to powder her nose, but, in view of this hostility, decided to reconsider the idea. It would never do to offend Aunt Elizabeth at the very start of things.

Aunt Anne was less frightening. She gave Sylvia a very sweet smile and held her hand when they went into the house together.

"You needn't be afraid of ghosts," she said. "We've had this house thoroughly exorcised."

Sylvia did not know the exact meaning of exorcised, nor had she any fear of ghostly visitants, but she thought it discreet to say, "Thank you very much. How kind of you!"

Colonel Fleming carried his daughter's bag up to her room, and was pleased when she gave a cry of delight at the daintiness of it, with its little white bed and window-curtains of sprigged muslin, and then admired the view from the window of the old garden and the stone terrace.

"Father! This is wonderful. I had no idea you had such a splendid old house."

"Not splendid," he said, "but old and full of family history. It's good to have you here. You're a Fleming all right. You'll find your great-grandmothers on the walls. All the dear women who went before us."

He did not tell her that her mother had spent her honeymoon with him in this house and that her portrait as a young girl like Sylvia had been put in the lumber-room fifteen years ago, by Aunt Elizabeth.

When Sylvia was left alone in her bedroom she leaned out of the casement window, with her chin in the cup of her hands, looking out into the garden where there was the first glint of spring in the trees and bushes, with daffodils nodding their lovely heads in the grass and along the sides of the stone pergola. An almond-tree was in a glory of pink fire, and there was a sprinkle of white blossom on the twisted boughs of the old orchard below the high wall. Aunt Elizabeth was grubbing up some weeds in one of the flower-beds, and an old gardener, dressed like a scarecrow, in a battered old bowler hat and trousers tied up with string, was trimming a yew hedge.

It all seemed very amusing to Sylvia, and almost like a fairy-tale. She had read about gardens like this in books by Thomas Hardy and George Meredith, but it had never entered her head that she *belonged* to one of them! England had been so foreign to her, so unknown, and sometimes in London she still felt oppressed by the dulness and gloom of English life. The people she met—her mother's old friends

—were so limited in their ideas, so conventional, so shut in by a code of manners which prevented them from ever expressing an emotion or talking about ideas in a free way. Abroad she had been used to meeting all sorts of queer free-spoken people, devoted to art or music, getting excited over some new theory of life, making love to her, like little Goldoni, bursting into song in public restaurants, laughing at the jest of life and its little ironies.

But in England people were afraid of giving themselves away. They were all repressed and cold and self-controlled, and rather sad, as though they had a grudge against life, like Aunt Elizabeth down there. But now she was beginning to like them and understand them better. She felt more at home. It was extraordinary how this old house seemed to call to some inherited instincts in her blood. After all, she was English, in spite of the French *pensionnat de demoiselles,* in spite of her life with Stephen in Paris, in Rome and other places.

She touched the little window-curtains of sprigged muslin, went round the room on tip-toe because the boards creaked, and smiled at the red and white roses on the water-jug, at the china figures in some old-fashioned ware on the mantel-piece, at the dressing-table—Sheraton, as she knew after her shopping adventures—on which her father had put a bouquet of flowers as a love-offering. That shy, stern, sad-eyed father of hers, who had made such a mess of life with her mother! He was getting quite devoted to her. She did not feel in the least degree afraid of him. She felt none of the prejudice against him which made Stephen rage if she even mentioned his name. She put just the "teeniest touch" of powder on that rather unfortunate nose of hers—after all, she couldn't let Aunt Elizabeth have it all her own way—and because she was feeling very happy, sang a few lines out of *La Bohème* in her high soprano, which her baby Mussolini had compared to the trills of a nightingale—until she remembered that Aunt Elizabeth would hear her and would probably regard such a noise as a foreign nuisance.

Then she went downstairs, looking as meek and demure as possible, and found her father waiting for her, to show

her over the house, and tell her anecdotes about the portraits on the walls in those funny old uniforms, and explain to her the way in which the house had been altered and re-built in various periods of history—about which she knew scandalously little.

In the afternoon there was a tea-party which was rather entertaining. It seemed to Sylvia like a stage play caricaturing English life, or like a chapter out of a book by William J. Locke. They were the local gentry who had come to have a look at her. Aunt Elizabeth presided over the tea-table in the drawing-room and made rude remarks to them. At least they seemed rather rude to Sylvia, though they appeared to be humourous to the company.

"Well, General," she said to an old gentleman with mild blue eyes and a little white moustache, who had commanded an army in France during the war, "I read your speech to the ex-service men the other day. Rather high-falutin', wasn't it? If you'd tell those lazy rascals to clear out to the Colonies, instead of expecting the country to keep them in idleness, you might help things forward a bit."

"They're good fellows," said the General in a kindly way. "It's not their fault that trade is bad. We mustn't be too hard on them, after their service in the war."

"They'd be all right if we shot down their leaders," said Aunt Elizabeth. "Agitators paid with foreign gold."

"You're rather drastic, Miss Fleming," said the General.

It was impossible to believe that he had commanded an army in the Great War. He looked like an amiable old gentleman who had spent his life in a rose-garden.

"I believe in being strong," said Aunt Elizabeth. "I'm not like Anne here, who would give a pamphlet on brotherly love to the Soviet Government and expect them to burst into tears and pay their debts."

Anne answered this challenge meekly.

"I think that with a little more Christian spirit even Russia might be brought to reason."

"Ah," said an elderly lady bearing a remarkable resemblance, thought Sylvia, to portraits of Queen Elizabeth, "you're one of the saints of the earth, my dear. You forget

the world is full of devils. Look at the Germans—unaltered and unalterable."

"I'm inclined to think the French are the greatest menace to Europe," said another lady, with a little deprecating laugh. "They intend to dominate Europe by military power. Look at their aëroplanes. Ten to our one! And I hear they are putting long-range guns opposite the English coast. It's not pleasant."

"Rubbish, Fanny!" exclaimed Aunt Elizabeth. "You've been reading the gutter press. They ought to be prosecuted."

"Our greatest danger is not outside the country, but here at home," said a handsome old gentleman with a parchment-coloured face and thin, delicate hands folded about the knees of his well-pressed trousers. Sylvia heard him addressed as "Judge" by her father. "Unless we get back discipline into the spirit of our people, I very much fear that we shall never regain our old position. Labour is entirely out of hand. The Trade Unions have become tyrannies against the well-being of the nation. Our class is bled white to subsidise incompetence and political blackmail. I am not illiberal—oh yes, I know my reputation as a Die-Hard!—but I really think we must unite against the despotism of the so-called democracy."

"Too late, Judge," said a thin old man, stirring a cup of Aunt Elizabeth's tea. "It's Democracy's day out, and it leaves orange-peel and waste-paper in all the beauty-spots. That's symbolical of the spirit of the age. No reverence! The old beauty of English life, its romance, its quiet countryside, are spoilt by the onrush of squalor and vulgarity. Too many people. The masses in their millions pressing on. Pressing on! We can't stop 'em. They're going to overwhelm us, and their weapons are death-duties, income-tax, and high wages. It's the last phase of this kind of thing——"

He waved his hand towards Colonel Fleming's gardens, and gave a little cracked laugh.

"It was all very pleasant while it lasted," he said. "Charming! It produced the nicest people in the world. Our-

selves! But our day is done. Our old estates are breaking up, jerry-built villas and cheap bungalows are invading our old fields, the char-a-banc is roaring through country lanes, and here we sit, pretending not to hear the enemy at the gates. That big, blusterous enemy of the old caste—Democracy! That million-headed dragon called 'Progress'! My dears, nothing on earth is going to give us back our old prerogatives of wealth and social ease and security of tenure. We are at the end of aristocracy in England—the old-fashioned gentry, the Salt of the Earth!"

He spoke with a gentle irony, smiling around over his tea-cup; and for a moment or two the words of this old gentleman—Lord Ladbroke, as Sylvia knew him afterwards—caused a gloomy silence in the room, until one of the younger ladies, rather a bright, pretty woman, took up his challenge and spoke of Mussolini and his Fascisti as the cure for what she called the "disease of democracy."

Lord Ladbroke shook his old head and smiled again.

"Only asking for more trouble," he said. "We're not cut out for Mussolinis in this country. In any case, economics are too strong for us. It's arithmetic that is going to kill us off. So many millions. So much money. Not enough to support us in the old ways of life. We have to be cancelled out to make both ends meet for the larger crowd. It's quite inevitable."

Sylvia sat listening to this conversation with a flickering smile about her lips. Once or twice she was tempted to intervene, especially when the lady spoke about French militarism. She hated any one to say a word against her dear France. But it was all very amusing and interesting. Her father's people—these old fogeys of the ancient caste—were rather unhappy with themselves, poor dears! They seemed to be afraid of the future and rather annoyed with modernity. She felt sorry for them in a way.

It must be rather distressing to be looking back on life instead of forward like herself, to feel that the adventure was over and not to come. They were so utterly English in their way of speech, their outlook on life, their funny old clothes. Exactly like people in a book. Stephen would have drawn a

lovely caricature of the old Judge with his parchment-coloured face and beetling eyebrows, and of Lord Ladbroke, a delicate old man with a beautiful face, hunched up in his chair, with the tea-cup on his bony knees and that ironical smile curving his thin lips. She rather loved them all. They were so simple, and in a way distinguished. Even Aunt Elizabeth, with her blunt ways and her short hair, was not commonplace. She looked ready to command an army or rule the nation at a moment's notice.

Presently they began to take notice of Sylvia. Her father brought Lord Ladbroke over and said, "This is my little girl, Arthur. She reconciles me to leaving India."

"So I should say! So I should say!"

Lord Ladbroke took Sylvia's hand and patted it.

"This conversation of old fogeys must be rather dull for you, my dear. We sit and brood over the changes that are happening. Very foolish it must seem to a young lady like you. You don't mind changes. You adapt yourself to them. Nothing matters to youth as long as there's love left."

He smiled at her, with his head on one side.

"If I were sixty years younger I'd fall desperately in love with you—at first sight! Yes, and go through fire and water for you, and think nothing of it. Even now I can lose my heart to a pretty young girl like you and imagine the flames of passion I used to feel. I was a young devil when I was a subaltern in the Guards. Then I married a charming lady—she died twenty years ago, dear soul—and made her life intolerable because of my selfishness. Women take a great risk when they marry. I often feel sorry for them. But that's life. A gamble, a hazard, a damned risky adventure. Have you thought anything about it yet, my dear?"

"Quite a good deal," answered Sylvia, smiling. "I find it extremely amusing."

"That's good!" he said. "That's good! As long as you can keep a sense of humour——"

He sat down by her side in a deep arm-chair and put his hand on her sleeve, and whispered to her:

"I used to know your mother. A beautiful creature I

thought her. Always so gay. That father of yours took things too seriously. I told him so at the time. Women can't be commanded like a regiment, you know. What's become of her, if you don't mind telling me?"

Sylvia told him that her mother was in London, after a long time abroad.

"Your father ought to have divorced her," said the old man. "Not fair keeping a woman from marrying again. Dog in the manger, I call it. But of course he's a Catholic and all that, and I'm a heretic and unbeliever. Always was, since I refused to say family prayers with the butler and the cook, and received a thorough good thrashing from my old dad. All the same, I have a high respect for your father, only I wish he didn't take things so seriously. That affair in the Punjab—well, between ourselves, my dear, I think he went a bit too far. Justice? Yes, that's all right. Must have it. But I believe in turning a blind eye sometimes, or ruling with the velvet glove. It's the same with women. No use being high-handed. And if you want the advice of an old man—of course you don't!—just remember this when you put on a wedding-ring. Don't make a hero of your husband, because you're sure to find him out. Make a comrade of him. It's far safer and lasts longer. Comradeship! That's the best thing in life, especially between men and women. . . . But forgive me for talking all this nonsense, my dear. It's because your pretty face makes my tongue wag."

"Now then, Arthur," said Aunt Elizabeth, "what wickedness have you been talking to my niece?"

"No wickedness at all," answered the old man, winking at Sylvia. "Only the foolish prattle of senility."

It was then that Sylvia saw a young man come into the room. As he was the only young man, he would have been noticeable anyway, but as he was a very good-looking young man, he attracted Sylvia's particular attention.

It was obvious also that he noticed her with a quick glance of curiosity, and perhaps a moment's surprise. He was a tall young man, with very fair hair and a little fair moustache which showed his upper lip.

"Almost too beautiful to be true!" thought Sylvia, with a sense of excitement. "Can that be a cousin of mine, I wonder?"

Her father answered her unspoken question by bringing the young man up.

"This is the 'sort of cousin' of yours, Sylvia. Neville Lacey. He wants to know you."

"Naturally," said the young man, with a quizzical glance at Sylvia. "As a sort of cousin, I think it's only fair."

He sat on a hassock by her side, with his long legs up to his chin and his hands clasped round his knees. He didn't seem to be in a hurry to talk, but presently favoured her with an observation.

"Been doing any golf lately?"

"No," answered Sylvia. "I don't play the game."

He seemed surprised, and thought the matter over for a time.

"Tennis?"

"No," answered Sylvia, who was not very strong at games.

That seemed to silence him completely, but he rallied after a few moments and made another enquiry.

"Huntin'?"

"Huntin' what?" asked Sylvia with simple innocence. She was not absolutely certain what beasts were hunted in that part of England. She thought it tactful to drop that "g."

Neville Lacey regarded her answer as a joke, and laughed quietly at the humour of it.

"Rather good," he said. "Pulling my leg, what?"

"I should hate to be so familiar, even with a distant cousin," said Sylvia, regarding his very long legs.

Neville Lacey thought over that remark, and decided that it was also rather humourous.

"You needn't mind me," he said. "I get my leg pulled a good deal, one way and another. And I'm rather good at the game myself."

"What else do you do?" asked Sylvia.

The Honourable Neville Lacey—she discovered that he

was an honourable man, at least by right of birth—gave her an admiring glance, as one swordsman to another.

"*Touché!*" he said. "As a matter of fact, I'm at a loose end since the dear old war. Marking time, as it were, and wondering what there is to do in life for the son of a penniless peer without education—Harrow and Christ Church, you know—expensive tastes, high ideals, and absolutely no prospects whatever except the little old workhouse in my latter years."

"Surely you might do something with your ideals," suggested Sylvia hopefully. "In what way are they high?"

Neville Lacey smiled beneath his little fair moustache.

"They're so high that I have to keep them out of doors. They need fresh air."

"Are they so dangerous as all that?" asked Sylvia. "Infectious or anything?"

"People don't like to get near them," he answered with sham gravity. "Afraid they might bite. I believe, for instance, in the simple virtues, like truth-telling, common or garden honesty, looking at the other fellow's point of view, team-work for one's crowd, tolerance, playing fair. In fact, I might call myself an idealist born out of due time."

"You certainly might call yourself that," said Sylvia, in a non-committal way. "But of course some people might misunderstand you and call you something else. These mistakes are made now and then."

He glanced at her sideways with an approving smile.

"Look here," he said, "you and I seem to understand each other. We talk the same language. Where did you learn? How is it we haven't met before?"

"I haven't been avoiding you deliberately," said Sylvia. "I've been studying life in other countries."

Neville Lacey seemed to think that explained a good deal.

"One gets ideas out there. I found a few in France, during the war. It's astonishing how they used to come into one's head under a tin hat. Now and again I rout them out and have a look at them. I confess they surprise me every time."

"Might I hear one or two?" asked Sylvia politely.

He grinned and looked round the room.

"No, not in this assembly. The old General over there might have an apoplectic stroke if he got wind of them. And your honoured father wouldn't let me stay the week-end. That would be a nuisance, because I want to talk to you."

"Would it please you if I put in a word now and then?" asked Sylvia. "Or do you insist on doing all the talking yourself?"

He defended himself from that suggestion.

"I'm a strong, silent man; I hardly ever talk unless I find myself interesting."

"It must be your good day," she observed thoughtfully.

He agreed to that. It was due to finding her among his unexplored cousins. He had crowds of cousins, but he found them people to avoid, as a rule. They misunderstood his sense of humour. It was agreeable to find an unexpected cousin who was not only attractive to look at, if he might say so, tactlessly, but was also of penetrating intelligence, if she would forgive him the appearance of flattery.

Sylvia laughed rather too hilariously for an English drawing-room. She was conscious of Aunt Elizabeth's disapproval. After further conversation with Mr. Neville Lacey, her "sort of cousin," she was taken away from him by Aunt Anne, who introduced her to one of the old ladies. But she had learnt enough of him to know that he was going to make life very amusing in her father's house.

XVI

SYLVIA was slightly conscience-stricken towards the end of her visit for having neglected her father to some extent for the company of Neville Lacey, and she was aware that he looked hurt about it. It was Neville's fault mostly, because he had always made some plausible and entertaining excuse for taking her off alone, in order, as he said, to avoid the soul-searching eyes of Aunt Elizabeth, whom he had always hated since the time she boxed his ears for exploding a cracker under the grand piano on Guy Fawkes' Day. That was when he was young enough to like the noise of explosives. Since his experience as a little hero of the Great War the sound of any kind of cracker, popgun, or sudden report was liable to give him shell-shock. So he said, though he looked in "rude health," as Sylvia told him.

They explored the village together and visited the chapel where the Flemings had worshipped throughout the centuries, and where he pointed out to Sylvia a knight's helmet that had been worn by one of her ancestors, who was also his, at Agincourt.

"Remarkable thing to reflect," he said, "that if that old bird hadn't escaped the point of a French sword and come back to marry his mother's serving-wench, you and I wouldn't be standing here now very much amused with each other. Rather frightens one, doesn't it?"

"I don't feel alarmed," said Sylvia.

Neville Lacey thought she ought to feel alarmed. He was always scared when he thought of the law of cause and effect.

"For instance, it depends entirely on M. Poincaré of France as to whether in another four hundred years another young man and woman, even more beautiful than ourselves, possibly with greater intelligence, though that is hardly likely, will stand here looking at my tomb or yours, and dropping a silent tear over our long-forgotten ghosts."

"I can't quite follow that. What has it got to do with Poincaré?" asked Sylvia, with a gasp of surprise.

"Everything," he said. "And that's the devil of it. If, for instance, Poincaré insists upon the French sitting tight in the Ruhr and preventing the prosperity of Germany, thus leading to the continued stagnation of European trade, and possibly another little war when Germany feels strong enough to have a go at it, then it's obvious that England won't be able to take a shilling or two off the income-tax and employ her unemployed margin of industrial workers."

"Well, what about it?" asked Sylvia, groping for the argument.

"And if there's no financial relief for a fellow of my class and character," said Neville Lacey, "existing at present on a small allowance from an impoverished father, then it's obvious that he can never take unto himself a wife, expensive or otherwise."

"That certainly would be sad," remarked Sylvia.

"In that case," continued Neville gloomily, "there will be no beautiful descendants in another five hundred years to remember his heroic deeds in the battle of Ypres, slightly exaggerated by those imaginative fellows, the war correspondents of that distant age. You see how things work out. Frightful, isn't it?"

Sylvia agreed that it was a distressing thought.

"To think that our descendants should depend for the gift of life upon the corruption of French politics or an ill-turned phrase in a letter by Lord Curzon!" said Neville Lacey, with even greater melancholy.

That argument, interrupted sometimes by Sylvia's laughter, lasted as far as the village, where Neville suddenly plunged into a little shop and bought a cheap gramophone and some records of the latest dance tunes.

"It's perfectly obvious," he said, "that you and I were born to dance with each other, and there's a very good room at the top of the house. It used to be the children's playroom when your great-grandfather used to pull the hair of my great-grandmother—or something like that—I've forgotten the precise relationship. There we can steal away

from Aunt Elizabeth under the pretext of searching for the genealogical tree, or the silver spurs of old man Fleming who commanded a cavalry brigade at Oudenarde. We could put in a very pleasant hour before dressing for dinner."

So it happened, and Sylvia thought it was worth while, though she was sorry to give her father the slip when he was hinting rather wistfully that a little walk would be pleasant for both of them.

Neville Lacey turned on the gramophone in the dusty old room with bare boards at the top of the house, and they danced very enjoyably between a mangy old bear at one end and a suit of rusty armour at the other, talking ridiculous nonsense, laughing at each other's gibes, and forgetful of time, until Aunt Elizabeth appeared in the doorway, with a look of great annoyance.

"Dinner is waiting!" she said, as though the world and all its works were also waiting. "I've been hunting for you everywhere. Perhaps another time when you want to avoid the company of your elders—deplorably dull, no doubt!—you'll signify your whereabouts."

"Good gracious!" cried Sylvia. "I'm most frightfully sorry. I had no idea it was so late."

"Entirely my fault, dear Aunt," said Neville Lacey, very cool and self-possessed. "I bought the gramophone. I beguiled the girl to this secret place, and the whole weight of this misdemeanour lies upon my straw-coloured head."

"You needn't tell me that, Neville," said Aunt Elizabeth severely. "And I've a good mind to box your ears, as I did once before in history."

Perhaps she was not quite so severe as she pretended, for there was a hint of amusement in her eyes as she glanced at that very good-looking young man who stood twisting his little fair moustache with imperturbable carelessness.

"I deserve it," he agreed. "But don't forget I'm liable to shell-shock at the slightest ill-treatment. Since the first battle of Ypres in the year One of the Great War my nerves have been entirely unstrung."

Aunt Elizabeth made a very cutting remark.

"I notice that you young men who did your duty in the war—and there was nothing else to do at the time!—make it an excuse for all subsequent indiscipline. . . . Well, Sylvia, you had better slip into a dinner-frock and put some more powder on your nose."

"In half a jiffy, Aunt."

It was certainly an unfortunate episode in her week-end visit, although, as she slipped into her frock, she gave a little squeal of laughter at the remembrance of that dance in the dusty lumber-room and of Neville's preposterous conversation. He was certainly a very funny young man, and she had never met any one like him. And he was most adorably handsome and aristocratic. It was really astonishing good luck that he should be a cousin of hers.

Her father looked slightly downcast when she appeared at the dinner-table, but he kissed her hand when she passed him, and did not say one word of reproof to her, though he permitted himself some sarcastic remarks to Neville Lacey, who sauntered down twenty minutes later, looking very noble in his dinner-jacket and apologising with the word "Sorry!" and an amiable smile.

"We regret having begun dinner without you, Neville. When I was a subaltern with the regiment in India, the Colonel would have had a few words to say. Doubtless the discipline of the Guards is not so severe."

"We were generally up to time in France and Flanders," said Neville very coolly. "Not that I want to buck on the subject."

Aunt Anne changed the tone of the conversation by remarking in a cheerful way that the tulips were looking beautiful in the garden, and that they would probably have a fine summer, as the oak was out before the ash.

The Colonel turned his attention to Sylvia.

"I would like to have a little talk with you after dinner, my dear, if Neville will release his monopoly for half an hour."

Neville winked at Sylvia, almost imperceptibly, but caused her lips to twitch with a smile.

"We'll have a long talk, Father," she said. "Neville must

entertain Aunt Elizabeth while you and I steal away to the library."

Aunt Elizabeth remarked with a certain irony that she found Neville's style of entertainment with elderly aunts almost too overwhelming. It was difficult for her to live up to his Charles Grandison manners.

In the library after dinner Sylvia curled herself up in a big leather chair, while Colonel Fleming sat by the deep-throated fire-place where some logs were burning, and smoked a cigar and forgot his disappointment about the walk he had wanted.

"This is rather good!" he said. "You sitting there as if you lived here, keeping company with a lonely old Father."

"Not so very old," said Sylvia. "You rather exaggerate your years, Father. Give me a little time and I'll rejuvenate you."

"All the time you want," he answered hopefully. "I'm greedy for you, my dear. I hate to think of your going away to-morrow."

Sylvia laughed, and suggested that they could see each other before long, somewhere in town. What about those little shows, and the meetings in the Row, and London society in the season?

"Yes," said Colonel Fleming. "I'm looking forward to all that. We'll begin the social round by a reception at the Burfords. You haven't met that fool of a cousin of mine. His American wife is rather amusing, and looks rather well at the top of the staircase."

"What relations are they to Neville?" asked Sylvia.

The Colonel explained that Neville was a kind of a cousin of Lord Burford.

"Good heavens!" said Sylvia. "He seems to be a kind of cousin to everybody. Does he make a habit of it?"

"Can't help himself," said the Colonel, laughing. "All English families intermarried, in the good old days before the younger sons broke into the Gaiety chorus, some time in the eighties. If you're related to one, you're related to all. Caste—and not a bad system. It produced good types. There's something in Blood, my dear, whether it's

race-horses or human beings. That beauty of yours means centuries of careful selection between people of good birth, refinement, freedom from the sordid cares and stunting toil of the humbler classes."

"My luck!" said Sylvia. "But rather unfair on the humbler classes, don't you think? Why shouldn't they be beautiful, poor dears? I hate to think I own a vested interest in beauty!"

She spoke with a touch of sincerity behind her playfulness, and her father seemed to think over her words as though they gave him a new idea.

"There's something in that, Sylvia. And perhaps I exaggerate. I've seen beautiful girls among the villagers here, and the native women of India. It's the mechanical age—industrialism—which stunted our English folk. The steam-engine—a curse, in my opinion. Progress—an illusion! These motor-cars, rushing about the countryside, spoiling its beauty, and doing away with the good old horse. Is there any more human happiness? I doubt it."

"I'm afraid you're just a trifle reactionary, Father," observed Sylvia. "I don't think even your best friend could call you a Liberal, of the more advanced school."

The Colonel agreed. "I'm a hard-baked old Tory. And nothing will change me."

"I think you'll change a little if you see much of me," said Sylvia. "I'm modern to the tips of my fingers."

The Colonel smiled at her, and observed that he would not resist her modernising influence. But he dared not see too much of her.

"I don't want to make your poor mother jealous," he said gently. "I can't go back on my word and take you away from her. How did she like your coming down here?"

Sylvia admitted that she didn't like it, and had been rather emotional and talked about "the thin end of the wedge."

"But you can rely on me to be quite fair to both of you, Father. If I feel myself getting too fond of this old house, I shall have to check the impulse to desert Montpelier Square."

She hesitated a moment, and then spoke with an engaging smile.

"Of course there's one way of making everything very simple and avoiding this double life, which may become a little trying."

"What's that?" asked the Colonel doubtfully.

"Why, the whole family might take up residence here, including Mother. She's still your wife, you know, according to the Catholic faith, they tell me. Also I think she hankers after you. She has a great respect for you, Father, I assure you."

"Hush!" said Colonel Fleming, rather harshly. "You don't know what you're saying, my dear. It's distressing to me."

"Well, there it is," said Sylvia brightly. "I throw it out as a little suggestion, Father. It would certainly save you a lot of money."

Colonel Fleming's face flushed and he waved away the subject with a quick gesture of his bronzed hand.

For a little while he was silent, and then went to his desk and took a letter from the top of a small drawer.

"I've had a note from your Uncle Jack," he said, "He wants me to put up the capital for a millinery establishment in Bond Street. Thinks there's a good deal of money in it, if your mother takes charge. What's your idea about it, Sylvia?"

Sylvia thought well of it. It would keep her mother from brooding. And, undoubtedly, she had a great organising genius and the most marvellous taste. There would be no social slur in the idea, as lots of great ladies were doing the same thing.

"Well," said Colonel Fleming, thoughtfully, "three thousand pounds seems a lot of money. It would dig a large hole in my little savings. On the other hand, if your mother has set her heart on it, and if Jack Rivington thinks well of the idea, I don't want to refuse."

He laughed, and spoke to his daughter with a trace of self-consciousness.

"They think me a hard fellow, Sylvia. That's my repu-

tation in the world, and in my own family. Anne thinks I'm a murderer. Your mother thinks I'm close-fisted. I daresay even young Neville thinks I'm a mean old devil because I refused to lend his father a couple of thousands for some shady scheme in the city. Even since I've been home my relatives have been suggesting ways in which I should invest my money for their benefit. Why, that fool Burford wants me to support one of his societies for the promotion of prohibition in England! I'm damned if I do. But as far as your mother is concerned I want to be generous. I want to wipe out my reputation for being hard. You can tell her that I'll back that idea of hers up to three thousand, though it will pinch me to do so."

"It's very generous of you, Father," said Sylvia. "And I'm sure she'll be grateful to you. But if the thing's a success, you know, there will be very handsome profits for you. Uncle Jack says so."

The Colonel seemed rather doubtful of those profits.

"As long as I don't have to shoulder any losses——"

There was a tap on the door, and Neville Lacey showed his handsome face.

"Sorry to intrude," he said, "but Aunt Elizabeth and I are not getting on very well. She accuses me of upsetting the chess-board just as she was winning. Won't you bring Sylvia upstairs, sir, and relieve the painful situation? What about a little music, Sylvia?"

Sylvia sang some Italian songs to Aunt Anne's accompaniment. They weren't a great success, except with Neville, who thought them "top-hole."

"Too foreign for my liking," said Aunt Elizabeth. "All those trills and quavers make my blood run cold."

"Sing some of the old English songs," asked her father.

Aunt Anne produced bundles of them, and Sylvia sang "My Mother Bids Me Bind My Hair," and Shakespeare's compliment to herself, "Who is Sylvia?" Towards the end of it she looked over to her father, and saw that he was sitting watching her with moist eyes. Her stern father whom everybody thought so hard! It was Aunt Anne

who told her afterwards, in a whisper, that her mother used to sing it.

"Rather old-fashioned stuff," said Neville. "I prefer those operatic things—Tetrazzini, isn't it?—with those bird notes of yours."

"The child has a voice," said Aunt Elizabeth, rather grudgingly. "Not that I care for music. I always think it weakening. More suitable to the Latin races. As for Italian opera, it seems to me grotesque—enormously fat women with squeaky voices embracing little men with legs like broomsticks and voices that come out of their boots. Absurd!"

It was one of those statements that made Sylvia wonder at the limited ideas of her own people, surely the most inartistic people in the whole world! And yet adorable, in their way, and very comical. How pleasant it was in this old house, with its big fire-place and timbered ceilings, and furniture that had been used and touched by those "dear women," as her father called them, from whom she had been born, through the ages. England was stealing into her blood and spirit!

When her father said good night to her, he hoped she had been happy on her first week-end at home, and she answered, "As happy as a bird in its nest. I shall always be flitting back here, if I may."

"It's your home," said her father. "Waiting for you—and Stephen."

"Yes," said Aunt Elizabeth, "bring the boy with you next time. I like boys better than girls, in spite of Neville there. Not that I object to you, my dear. You've behaved much better than I expected, after your foreign upbringing."

"It's very kind of you to say so," said Sylvia, laughing a little at this rather sharp-edged compliment. But she liked this blunt, outspoken woman even more than Aunt Anne with her sweet smile and sentimental air.

Neville Lacey held her hand for a moment, and smiled into her eyes.

"Good night, Cousin," he said. "We had a great time with the gramophone. One day we'll have a real dance somewhere in town. I think we need each other, you and I. We laugh at the same things."

They laughed at the same thing then.

XVII

IT was Uncle Jack who dominated the house in Montpelier Square, and it was only Sylvia who became a little impatient of his constant visits, his anecdotes of life in wild places, his fierce denunciations of modern civilisation, his flamboyant way of speech, his thousand and one schemes for making the fortunes of the family, and his habit of smoking strong cigars at all hours and in every room.

Mrs. Fleming found her brother ceaselessly amusing and said that his company cheered her up. Stephen was fascinated by the stories of a man who had seen so much of the world in far places and in rough company, and was shocked when Sylvia suggested that not a third of what he told could be taken as gospel truth, or even truth according to the newspapers. Their remarkable uncle acquired the habit of dropping in, as he called it, at any time which seemed to suit him and it was not unusual even to hear his hearty voice, his shout of "Now you people! Not out of bed yet?" as early as half-past eight in the morning, before any of them had come down to breakfast. Indeed it was noticeable that his visits generally preceded a meal, when he always had an excellent appetite. If he came in to tea, he invariably stayed to supper and kept them all up very late, until Sylvia was nothing but a yawn, because his eloquence began to warm up best after ten o'clock and the third whiskey.

As far as Sylvia could make out, after some cross-questioning, he lived in a residential club for single gentlemen, somewhere in Bloomsbury, and from her mother's old friend, Henry Carey, she learned that it was a place inhabited mostly by poverty-stricken men of good class who paid a small price for a bed-sitting-room and did their own cooking, unless they could afford to take their meals out. At the present time it was largely used by ex-officers, who spent

most of their time cursing the ingratitude of their country, searching the advertisement columns of the *Daily Telegraph* for situations vacant, and borrowing odd half-crowns from their friends.

"I haven't descended quite as far as that," said Henry Carey with his gentle smile, "but unless there's some relief from income-tax and an unexpected rise in rubber shares, I shall probably join that impoverished fraternity. I must say I admire your Uncle Jack for keeping such high spirits in adversity. It's a disgrace to the country that a man like that, who has served the Empire in two wars and done splendid work all over the world—pioneer work, as he says, blazing the trail for the younger generation—should not find some scope for his remarkable abilities."

After Colonel Fleming's consent to provide the necessary capital for starting the millinery establishment in Bond Street, Uncle Jack found some scope for his abilities in organising that business on behalf of his sister, purely out of good-nature and family affection, as he pointed out. In order to be more helpful and to be on the spot at all times, he gave up his membership of the residential club and brought two shabby old bags to Montpelier Square, where he "pegged out a claim," as he called it, to a small bedroom on the top floor formerly used as a box-room. He was good enough to say that he did not mind roughing it, so that he could make himself useful, and that anything was good enough for a man who had slept under the stars during the best years of his life and gone hungry many times.

"Don't bother about food as far as I'm concerned," he told Mrs. Fleming. "A crust of bread and a hunk of cheese is good enough for a rough fellow like me."

Naturally Mrs. Fleming shared the family food with him, and Sylvia's observant eyes noted with amusement that Uncle Jack ate twice as much as any one else, and when he did eat a crust of bread made terrific inroads on the butter. It was also noticeable that soon after taking up quarters in Montpelier Square, Uncle Jack began to blossom out in new suits remarkably well cut, and brought back cardboard boxes containing new boots, ties, fancy waistcoats,

a silk hat of really noble architecture, and underclothing in considerable quantities. From those shopping expeditions he generally came back in taxi-cabs.

"Has Uncle Jack come into a fortune, or anything?" asked Sylvia one day, when she was sitting alone with her mother.

Mrs. Fleming laughed and shook her head.

"No such luck, poor dear fellow! As a matter of fact, I'm advancing him a little money. I couldn't bear to see him go about so shabbily, and it's necessary to be well-dressed now that he is going to interview the wholesale trade on behalf of this little adventure of mine."

Sylvia was silent for a moment or two.

"Yes, but, Mother," she said rather anxiously, "it will have to come out of Father's pocket, you know. Do you think it fair that he should have to keep Uncle Jack as well as us?"

"He's not going to keep him," answered Mrs. Fleming cheerfully. "Your uncle will help me to earn far more than the small sums I've advanced him on account of expenses."

"Well, I wish he wouldn't drink so much whiskey in the evenings," said Sylvia, satisfied with this excellent explanation—she liked that phrase "on account of expenses"—but raising another grievance.

Her mother rebuked her.

"I'm sorry you don't seem to like your uncle, Sylvia. I'm sure he's very kind to you. Thinks all the world of you, my dear. A strong man who has lived in the Colonies all his life needs a little alcohol. I should be a mean thing if I begrudged him that small comfort!"

It was Sylvia who felt mean. She didn't dislike Uncle Jack. On the contrary, he amused her a good deal, at times, and he was wonderfully good-natured, but she didn't quite like the idea of his living on the fat of the land at her father's expense. Still, as her mother said, he was going to pay back as soon as the profits began to flow in from the new business. They had taken the shop in Bond Street, and her mother was having a wonderful time ordering the latest models from the wholesale firms and engaging as-

sistants. The shop was going to be called Hélène, and circulars were being printed to send round to all the people in Mayfair, Belgravia and the Kensingtons. Henry Carey, who was taking a great interest in the business, put in three hundred pounds of his own money, on Uncle Jack's advice, and he was going to bring a countess on the opening day. They might get a paragraph about it in some of the papers.

Uncle Jack suggested making a little mystery about the name Hélène. Without exactly departing from the strict truth, they might hint vaguely at Russian princesses, or even English royalty. He knew some newspaper correspondents who would make a song about it. . . . "Wonderful London Yesterday. What we want to know. Who is the Russian princess, lately escaped from Soviet Russia, after frightful adventures, who—according to rumour—has set up as a *modiste* in Bond Street under the name of *Hélène?* Was there not a cousin of the late Czar, famous at the Russian Court as *La Belle Hélène?* Passing down Bond Street yesterday, we noticed . . ." et cetera. Uncle Jack let his imagination have a free rein, and made up a number of imaginary paragraphs rising in extravagance until *Hélène* had been identified as the Queen of Spain, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, President Wilson's widow, and the niece of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Mrs. Fleming's laughter rewarding him for every new absurdity.

The house became rather uncomfortable as the time approached for the shop to be opened. The dining-room was littered with trade catalogues, cardboard boxes of samples, and the latest models from Paris of spring cloaks and hats, so fascinating that Sylvia spent hours trying them on before a looking-glass or seeing how beautiful they looked on her mother. Mrs. Fleming was excited, businesslike, and happy. It was an adventure, and she liked adventures. Uncle Jack arrived and departed constantly in taxis, sometimes accompanied by beautiful young women whom he recommended as *mannequins,* until Mrs. Fleming put her foot down when three had been engaged. Indeed, for a week preceding *Hélène's* opening day the house became too electric in its atmosphere, and too utterly disorganised in

its domestic service, so that Stephen and Sylvia went off early to the studio in the King's Road and had most of their meals there in picnic style, having laid in a store of sardines, biscuits, and cocoa which they boiled up on an oil stove.

Stephen had joined the Slade School but was not beginning his classes until the start of the new term. Meanwhile he was doing some etchings of London life which he thought were pretty good and Sylvia considered works of the greatest genius. Obviously they were not commonplace or undistinguished, because two artists at least pronounced them to be "strong stuff" and jolly full of promise. Those were the two young men who had studios in the same block as Stephen and came to visit him when they were bored with their own work—which seemed quite often when Sylvia happened to be about. They were both much older than Stephen and were full-fledged artists who were actually keeping themselves on their art, at least on the work of their hands, though Frank Lawton called his particular work "bilge."

He drew illustrations of a very blood-curdling and dramatic character for *The Boy's Companion, The Detective Monthly,* and *The Camp Fire,* with head and tail pieces for *The Girl's Gazette,* coloured covers for *The Family Fireside,* and humourous sketches for *The Pugilistic World.* In moments of relaxation from this ardent pursuit of the elusive guinea, he painted pictures to please himself, mostly of atmospheric effects down the lower Thames, and was very pleased indeed with these extremely Futuristic studies which to Sylvia seemed as good one way up as any other way.

With mock melancholy, for he was really of an ironical disposition, he showed her one of these remarkable works. "There," he said, "is the soul of poor Frank Lawton in its most beautiful idealism. There is his purer and nobler nature liberated from the miserable need of pleasing Fleet Street editors and their errand-boy readers. Turner would have melted into tears and stood me a pint of beer at the sight of that exquisite monody. But if I were to take it

to Red Lion Court, where I have sold my genius for the price of a kippered herring—and an occasional drink—the editor of *The Detective Monthly* would have me thrown out of this office for trying to insult him. And it would be an insult! It would reveal to him his gross ignorance of art, his complete blindness to beauty, his damnable impudence in employing a man with a soul to do his dirty work!"

"But, surely," suggested Sylvia, "there are still people in the world who reverence beauty. May I suggest that I am one of them?"

She hid from him the dreadful secret that she saw no beauty in his particular style. She was, indeed, a little hypocritical over that for the sake of charity.

"That's true," he said. "The religion of beauty still has its secret worshippers. Your young brother is one of them. You are another. But the great mass of crawling humanity wallows in bestial indifference to good art. It prefers Muck."

Frank Lawton was an ex-officer of the Great War, like all his contemporaries who remained alive. He had learned to draw while lying in hospital for two years, hopelessly paralysed, it seemed, in his legs by a bullet near the spine. Then he had dragged about on crutches until one day something seemed to "click," as he described it, and he found he could walk again. During that time of illness he had studied music as well as art, and played his banjo with great spirit. He described himself intellectually as a moderate socialist, with leanings towards Bernard Shaw and the later prophets.

Sylvia listened to a good deal of "advanced thought," as she called it, in this studio in the King's Road, which she found an amusing contrast to the philosophy of her father and that conversation of "the old régime" in his country house. Stephen's most intimate friend, Sidney Swinton, belonged definitely to "Labour" and made a kind of religion of it, with faith and fervour. He believed there was no hope for the peace of the world except in the international brotherhood of some mysterious society called "the

Proletariat"—which occasionally he spoke of as The People —united against the corruption of Capital, the "bloody fetish" of Nationalism and the tyranny of the Traditional Mind.

It was clear to Sylvia, who had been a great reader in her wandering life, that this young man had absorbed the philosophy of H. G. Wells and made it his own. He spoke of "well-aired minds," and "the United States of the World." He looked forward with hope to a clean, labour-saving, scientific civilisation in which the jungle of ignorance would be cleared away and humanity would be devoted to the Research Magnificent of beauty and knowledge.

He was twenty-three years of age—just young enough to have escaped the war—and he had been educated in an elementary school at Battersea, followed by evening continuation classes, until he had been sent to Ruskin College, Oxford, by his father's Trade Union. Now he was studying art at the Slade School and earning a little money by drawing political cartoons for a Labour paper, in a high style of allegory in which the Working Man, generally wielding a hammer, stood as a heroic and noble figure before a villainous old gentleman in a fur coat and tall hat, labelled "Capitalist." He had a keen, sharp-featured face, rather pale and delicate-looking, with reddish hair, and an excited, nervous way of speech which sometimes developed into a slight stutter, especially when Sylvia was in the studio. She laughed at him, argued with him, adopted a philosophy of artistocratic intolerance in order to anger him, and discovered with some dismay that the boy had lost his heart to her.

That revelation happened quite suddenly, and was due to a visit from Neville Lacey. That handsome cousin of hers had called round at Montpelier Square at four o'clock one afternoon, and after an interview with Uncle Jack, who had taken him at first for the travelling representative of a wholesale millinery firm—no such luck, said Neville Lacey —had learned the address of Stephen's studio and Sylvia's whereabouts.

He arrived at tea-time in the studio. Frank Lawton was

toasting crumpets—his own contribution to the meal—at a gas stove into whose meter sixpence had to be injected at critical moments. Stephen was doing a charcoal caricature of Frank Lawton engaged in that delicate operation. Sylvia, with a blue pinafore over her frock, looking as much like an art-student as any girl could when she wasn't, was sitting on a low hassock, mending a pair of Stephen's socks and singing with little bursts of ecstasy, while Sidney Swinton played Tannhäuser on a piano which had been hired from a shop in the King's Road for these musical moments.

Neville Lacey opened the door without knocking, and stood there for a moment, gazing at the scene with surprise and good-humour.

"Quite like a stage scene of studio life in Chelsea," he remarked, when Sidney Swinton became aware of him and stopped playing in the middle of a bar. "I thought that sort of thing was invented by women-novelists. Or was it Compton Mackenzie who started the idea? May I intrude with my inartistic presence?"

"If you don't mind stepping gracefully over that plate of buns," said Sylvia.

She introduced Neville to Stephen, who looked slightly hostile to his unknown cousin, very elegantly dressed, from his black morning coat to his white spats. Then to the company.

"Mr. Lawton, Mr. Swinton. This is my cousin, the Honourable Neville Lacey, though why he pretends to be more honourable than the rest of creation I haven't the faintest idea."

"I can't help it," said Neville meekly. "I was born honourable. It's a great weakness in this wicked world. I try to forget it, and you needn't remember."

He shook hands with Stephen, nodded to the two other men, and sat down on the floor next to Sylvia, who was on the low hassock.

"There's a lot of dust about this place," said Sylvia. "I wouldn't risk those beautiful trousers, if I were you."

"Ready-made fellows," he said. "Misfits from Moses

Brothers. My regular tailor refuses me all further credit. May I have one of those crumpets?"

"Mr. Lawton paid for them," said Sylvia. "This is a community settlement."

"I can spare one to a distinguished guest," said Frank Lawton, with some regret, but chivalrously.

"Excuse me referring to a regrettable episode of history," remarkable Neville Lacey, presently. "But didn't I see you somewhere in the jolly old war?"

"It's possible," said Lawton. "There were quite a lot of men out there."

"True," said Neville, "but not men like you and me. Distinguished-looking fellows. Yes. In Amiens, one night. You and I consumed a large number of cocktails together in Charles's Bar. We had three days' leave from the lines, half-way through the battles of the Somme. I remember the choice language in which you cursed the Staff, and especially one particular Staff officer who happened to be my father. We enjoyed ourselves thoroughly, but I forget the end of the evening."

Frank Lawton laughed with a note of bitterness.

"I remember it all right. I went back to the line, did a raid next morning, and got a bullet in my spine. After that I lay in bed for two years. It was your father, as Intelligence Officer to the Fourth Corps, who reported that 'Z' trench was no longer held by the enemy. It was stuffed with them, of course."

"Naturally," said Neville Lacey. "My father, like all Intelligence officers, erred on the side of optimism. He does so still. He believes that Rubber shares are going to rise in the market. He bought a lot of 'em. That's why I get reach-me-downs from Moses Brothers. Oh, this Peace!"

"It's all right for you, I expect," said Frank Lawton in a more friendly way. "As the son of a belted Earl and all that, you don't have to sell your soul in the market-place."

Neville Lacey smiled at his simplicity.

"The son of an Irish peer is not the spoilt child of fortune these days. And if you can show me any market-place where the offer of my soul would find a customer, I

should feel highly flattered. That's why I envy the genuine out-of-works."

"Why?" asked young Swinton.

"They at least have their Trade Unions behind them. They receive the 'Dole' by blackmailing the Government. They're not educated above their station in life. Now I have the instincts of the aristocracy without the privileges of democracy, the predilections of the Pampered Class, and by no means whatever of satisfying my inherited tastes, or living up to the luxury of my family environment. You see the tragedy of the New Poor?"

"I don't believe in self-pity," said Sylvia.

Neville ignored her interruption and continued his thesis.

"If I had been born in Battersea I should be satisfied with the state of things in Battersea. An occasional mug of beer, a visit to the Movies now and then . . ."

He wasn't speaking seriously. He was only trying to amuse the company and himself. But he had made a bad break, as he knew when Sidney Swinton, the boy at the piano, pushed his hair from his forehead and spoke rather tensely:

"I *was* born in Battersea!"

Neville looked rather taken aback for a moment, but answered amiably: "Good for you!"

Sidney Swinton's face flushed to the colour of his hair, and he began to stammer a little.

"I know some people with s-s-supercilious airs who'll very soon find that Battersea—and other places like it—won't be s-s-satisfied with the state of things much longer."

"Good for them," said Neville. "But don't accuse *me* of supercilious airs. I'm a shy fellow, and humble."

Sidney Swinton glanced at him in a hostile way, but spoke more quietly.

"People throw that wretched dole in the faces of the unemployed."

"No, no!" cried Neville, as though at a public meeting.

"I've lived among them," said young Swinton. "They're my people. I know the poverty and misery among them. Men limping about London in search of work they can't

find. Haggard women with underfed kids, cursing and cuffing them because of nerves; all the squalor and ugliness of their lives, overcrowded in filthy little rooms. Fellows who fought in the war drifting into down-and-outs. Widows on pensions that wouldn't keep a cat. Shell-shocks for whom the Government doesn't care a curse. All the rest of the damned injustice—while men with 'instincts of aristocracy' and 'inherited tastes' complain about their 'poverty.' Poverty! They don't know what it means. It's hypocrisy."

"Let's conduct this argument without passion, gentlemen," said Sylvia, in a Parliamentary way.

"I agree with Swinton," said Stephen, gloomily.

Neville Lacey had listened to young Swinton's outburst with raised eyebrows and a smile. He was unperturbed.

"Excellently spoken," he said. "You ought to abandon art and go in for politics. That was a moving speech, sir."

"Yes, and a sneering comment," said young Swinton.

Neville Lacey shook his head.

"You mistake the accent of my unfortunate caste. Intellectually I am all on your side. If I were a working-man instead of a parasite searching for its prey, I should certainly complain that I hadn't been given a fair deal by the country I'd helped to save. Where are those 'Homes for Heroes'? Where are the 'Fruits of Victory'? On the other hand, it mustn't be forgotten that the working-man isn't the only one who saved England and paid the price. Let's be fair."

"It was the working-class that did most of the dying," said Sidney Swinton. "Now they do most of the starving."

Neville disagreed with him, politely.

"Man for man, I think my crowd did most in the way you mention. The second lieutenants—the 'one-pip' laddies from the Public Schools. They couldn't plead 'sheltered occupations' and service on the home front. As for starving, it seems to me that if a working-man wants work he gets jolly good wages. I'd like three pounds a week for sweeping up the streets. Easy work and good pay."

"Then why don't you go and do it?" asked Sidney Swinton, aggressively.

"Ah!" replied Neville Lacey. "That's where I quarrel with Labour. They're so very exclusive. They're so jealous of their class. Do you think I should get a job as road-sweeper if I applied to the Chelsea Town Council? Not a bit of it. They would look furiously at this black coat of mine, regard these white spats with anger and contempt, and say, We don't give work to Toffs. If I were starving to death they wouldn't let me handle a broom or a shovel unless I belonged to one of those very exclusive clubs called Trade Unions. So, you see, I must be a parasite or die of starvation. . . . May I have another crumpet, Mr. Lawton?"

Sidney Swinton lapsed into a gloomy silence, giving an occasional glance of hostility to Neville Lacey, who kept up a light conversation with Sylvia and Frank Lawton—the latter disarmed by Neville's amiability and sense of humour. Stephen, after his first antagonism, was won over by the astonishing good looks of this cousin whom Sylvia had already described to him with enthusiasm, and made a secret sketch of him on the cover of his note-book. That evening he took Sylvia and Stephen to the St. James's Theatre. On the following afternoon he took Sylvia to a *thé dansant* at the Piccadilly. Two afternoons later he hired a taxi and drove with her to Hampton Court, where they had tea. There were other expeditions and Sylvia did not appear so often in Stephen's studio.

He was the first to mention her neglect, not without brotherly sarcasm and the suggestion of a grievance.

"Aren't you getting rather too thick with Cousin Neville?"

"Thick?" enquired Sylvia blandly. "Is that one of the vulgar expressions you learn at the Slade School?"

Stephen wasn't to be put off by that jibe.

"You seem to consider the King's Road Chelsea rather beneath your dignity these days, now you've been taken up by high-born relatives. It's a whole week since you condescended to put your nose inside the studio."

"I'm glad I've been missed," said Sylvia brightly. "It makes you realise my value, little brother."

Secretly she was a little ashamed of her neglect. Per-

haps she had allowed Neville to monopolise her too much. He had introduced her to some very amusing people of his own set who had been very kind to her. Meanwhile Stephen's room had been getting deep in dust. She set to work then and there to repair the damage, and was very sweet to Stephen about the etchings he had done, and put him into a good humour by her warmth of enthusiasm.

He had not been the only one to miss her in that studio. Frank Lawton said "Quite a stranger!" when he sloped in from his room down the passage, and his eyes lighted up in his humorous face with a welcome that pleased her. Then young Swinton came in, and blushed at the sight of her and began to stammer in his nervous way and said something about Sylvia having deserted slum life for Society.

Of course she could not let that pass.

"If you call this a slum, it shows you've distorted views about the misery of the working-classes. I always thought you exaggerated the gloom of things in Battersea. There's quite a good park there, with real flowers in the beds."

She teased him about his "class-consciousness" until she saw that he was taking it badly and looked hurt.

"Play to me," she said, "and I'll warble. Music is so much better than political arguments!"

He played some Schubert songs for her, and she sang them while Stephen and Frank Lawton dived out to buy a tea-cake from the corner shop in the King's Road.

Presently Sidney Swinton stopped playing.

"I'm sorry for making such an ass of myself the other day," he said in a low voice.

"Which day?" she asked, as though it wasn't the only time.

"When that cousin of yours came here. That absurd outburst of mine—like a silly tub-thumper!"

"Oh, it was most interesting and amusing," said Sylvia graciously.

"No, it wasn't," said the boy gloomily. "I gave myself away hopelessly. That's where people of your cousin's class have the pull over us. They've been taught since their cradle never to say an emotional word. They wear a mask, and hide behind it. We just blurt out things."

A little later, he blurted something out himself.

"Now you don't come so much, things seem different. I mean, it was rather jolly playing to you—with old Lawton strumming on his banjo."

"Well," said Sylvia, "it's only a week since I was here last. And I'm here now. You talk as though I had departed for ever."

She was shy of the look on his face, and of the break in his voice. He was getting sentimental, like one or two other boys she had met about the world.

"It isn't my fault I haven't the manners of a Neville Lacey," he said, rather bitterly. "It's his luck, which comes from caste and all that."

"Good heavens!" cried Sylvia, laughing at him. "Your class-consciousness is becoming an obsession. There's nothing in it, as far as I'm concerned. Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor—what's the difference, as long as they're interesting?"

"You belong to a different crowd," said Sidney Swinton. "No chance for a fellow like me among all your fine friends. I can see that all right."

Sylvia felt rather sorry for him. He was quite a nice boy.

"Heaps of chances," she assured him. "Isn't this friendship? You at the piano and me warbling?"

She turned over the pages of the Schubert album, and was dismayed when "the Boy from Battersea," as Neville called him, suddenly bent his head and touched the back of her hand with his lips.

"Hush!" she cried. "That's not done in England, you know. Not even in Chelsea."

Sidney Swinton was obviously alarmed at his own audacity. He became very pale, and apologised.

"Please forgive me. Most infernal cheek . . . I just couldn't help it."

The ridiculous incident couldn't be discussed further, because Stephen and Frank Lawton returned with the tea-cake, and wondered why Sylvia was rather flustered, and why Sidney Swinton had a Eugene Aram look.

XVIII

COLONEL FLEMING came to town and put up at the East India Club in order to be near Sylvia and Stephen. Several times he walked, after dark, up Knightsbridge and down Hill Street to Montpelier Square, to look at the small house where his family were living, and he felt abominably like Enoch Arden.

One evening he heard Uncle Jack's voice in loud monologue, interrupted by a ringing laugh from Helen. What a mucker he had made of his life, or rather, what a bad deal he had had! He would have given the world to knock at that door and take his place there at the family table. He had visions of a game of bridge, with Helen as his partner against Sylvia and Stephen. How pleasant that would have been! Or sitting at the head of the table, with a few old friends, proud of that boy and girl of his, listening to their plans for the future. Then, after dinner, a song from Sylvia to his wife's accompaniment. That was how it ought to have been, but for Helen's desertion and the black-hearted treachery of a man he had trusted!

Now he strode past that house in the darkness, in the rain one night, humiliated, lonely, miserable, angered. Yes, angered, and jealous again, because his unworthy wife had the companionship for which he craved. He had been almost too generous. He had renounced his rights too easily. He wasn't getting his fair share of the boy and girl. It was not enough to take Sylvia out to lunch now and then, or to a theatre in the evening, and the happiness he had in listening to her chatter—very wise and full of knowledge sometimes—and watching her prettiness in the stalls, and the admiration she received, only made him more greedy for her. They were like stolen meetings. He was always afraid of coming face to face with her mother when Sylvia walked with him down Bond Street or along Piccadilly. Far better if she came to stay with him for a few months in the old house

which she had liked so much. But he was afraid he would hardly persuade her to that. She was utterly loyal to her mother, and put her first in all her thoughts and plans. It was astonishing that a weak, lawless woman should have so strong a hold over her children's hearts. She couldn't have been all bad, as sometimes he had thought her, in agony and rage.

From Sylvia he heard of the progress of her new adventure, that millinery business in Bond Street, though always he hurried past its windows. Its opening had not set the Thames on fire, in spite of Uncle Jack's friends in the Press. But customers were beginning to come in, ladies of title among them, and several Americans. Unfortunately it seemed that English ladies, and especially the titled ones, did not pay ready money for their orders. They opened accounts and expected a year's grace at least before they paid their bills. Uncle Jack was all against pressing them. "We must build up this business on credit," he said, with long arguments which rather interrupted the business of the day, according to Sylvia. He was all for lavish expenditure in the advertisement line—he called it "publicity"—and was launching out into double columns in the most important newspapers, with the name *Hélène* specially drawn by Stephen with an allegorical figure of Beauty.

"Rather expensive, I'm afraid—all those advertisements," said Colonel Fleming one day, as he was having tea with Sylvia in a shop near Baker Street, after a visit to Madame Tussaud's where Sylvia had been very satirical. He forgot sometimes that she was a grown-up woman with advanced views on art and life.

"Yes, I daresay they cost a good deal," she answered. "But they're sure to bring in business, and I must say Uncle Jack writes them very cleverly. I think he becomes inspired when he writes about beautiful womanhood. But I wish he would behave more respectfully to the *mannequins*. It's rather embarrassing at times, especially with people in the shop. He believes in 'treating 'em rough,' as he says."

She gave a ripple of laughter at the thought of Uncle

Jack's behaviour to a very haughty young lady who tried on the Paris models. There had been quite a scene one day at the luncheon hour, and it had needed all her mother's tact to prevent the departure of the young lady, who objected to Uncle Jack's familiarity. He had called her "my dear" instead of Miss Tuck, and had told her, in his "blunt Colonial way," as he described it, that a good-looking wench like herself ought to marry a strong silent man who would crush her to his heart in moments of passion and beat her when she spoilt his food. "You girls," he said, "are only playing at make-believe. You don't understand the eternal verities, the primeval instincts of brutality upon which life depends." Colonel Fleming was forced to smile at this account of Uncle Jack, but he disliked the whole business.

"It seems to me *infra dig.* My dear mother would have been horrified to think that any member of her family should ever keep a shop."

"Oh, everybody's doing it!" said Sylvia. "Half the people in the peerage, Father."

"Well, all I can say is that Society—as I knew it—is breaking up," answered the Colonel. "Class distinctions have gone, and with them the old dignity and code of the English gentry. It seems sad to me, though I may be old-fashioned."

"You *are* old-fashioned, Father!" said Sylvia, patting his sleeve and smiling into his melancholy eyes.

"I'm also a little anxious," he complained. "Those advertisements cost a terrible lot of money, I believe. I don't want your mother to get into difficulties again."

"Oh, she has a wonderful head for business," Sylvia assured him. "You should see the way she handles those haughty young ladies. They all adore her, and work twice as hard as they would for anybody else. I only get in the way when I try to lend a helping hand. That's why I can spend so much time with you, Father."

She did not think it necessary to tell him that she also spent a good deal of time with Neville Lacey. Perhaps just a little too much, as it sometimes occurred to her.

Colonel Fleming had another grievance which he men-

tioned rather sadly. Stephen seemed to avoid him. He had always made an excuse of his work to refuse invitations to lunch and tea, and even to get out of going to the theatre.

"Surely he can't be working as hard as all that?" enquired the Colonel. "I'm feeling rather hurt about it, my dear."

"Go and see him at the studio," suggested Sylvia. "I'm sure he would be proud to show you his studies. You can always win old Stephen by a word about his work. I notice that artists crave for appreciation more than the vainest woman. It's their temperament, you know. And Stephen is temperamental from the hair of his head to the tips of his toes."

She covered up the distressing fact that Stephen, in spite of all her cajoleries, and arguments, and bullyings, declined to show any civility to a father for whom, he said, he had no sense of loyalty and no respect.

There was another bee in his bonnet which made him obstinate to avoid intimate relations with the author of his being. It was that affair in the Punjab, which, as far as Sylvia was concerned, seemed too remote in its interest to affect her judgment. She was quite sure, anyhow, that her father couldn't have been cruel with any intention of cruelty. His eyes were too kind for that, and he had a spirit of chivalry. But Stephen had been talking about the affair with Sidney Swinton, who had called it "bloody murder," an outrage against the liberty of downtrodden peoples, and a disgrace to the British Empire. That was before he knew that Colonel Fleming was a close relative of Stephen's, or, indeed, any relative, and he was astounded and dismayed when Stephen said, very grimly, "It's my father. And I quite agree about the bloody murder." After that conversation Stephen sloped out, turned up the files of a newspaper in the public library at the corner of Elizabeth Street, and came back raging to Sylvia.

"I can't see any redeeming thing in the whole affair," he growled. "That precious father of ours shot down men and women in cold blood. Mowed 'em down with machine-

guns! How in the name of God can we take money from him? How can you bring yourself to sit down at the same table with him? It's horrible!"

"My dear Stephen," said Sylvia calmly, "he's one of the gentlest men on earth. He wouldn't hurt a fly, unless the fly were spreading poison about, which is a way they have, I believe. In any case, he's our father, and he's been very kind to us lately, and he's paying the rent of this studio, old boy."

Stephen had threatened drastic action.

"I've a good mind to clear out of the damned place. I would rather starve than be under obligations to a man like that. A worse murderer than any poor wretch who stabbed his pal in a drunken brawl. A deliberate, wholesale murderer—like Nero."

It was impossible to tell her father about that conversation and others like it. She could only make excuses for Stephen and plead his temperament. She was even worried after making that suggestion that her father should call round on Stephen at the studio, especially when he accepted it at once and said, "I'll go to-morrow. I want to make friends with him. One day he'll inherit the old house, and the family traditions, I hope."

"Well, I'm not sure about the traditions, Father," said Sylvia cautiously. "Stephen's a child of modernity, you know. Ideas change."

Colonel Fleming laughed and raised his hands.

"They do indeed! I can't keep pace with them. But Stephen has the old blood. It must count for something."

He went round to the studio next day at tea-time, and it was rather unfortunate that Sylvia was not there, owing to a previous engagement with Neville, who was giving a party in his own rooms in Lyall Street, opposite the old Russian Embassy, with two young officers of the Guards and two ladies from the Russian Ballet, who were rather beautiful and very merry in spite of the tales they told of Bolshevik atrocities.

In answer to the Colonel's knock Stephen opened the door, and looked rather staggered when he saw his father there.

"Hullo, my dear lad," said the Colonel. "I hope I'm not interrupting your work. If I'm a nuisance, just let me know."

Stephen muttered something about it being all right, but wasn't cordial, as his father saw, with a sense of disappointment.

"Show me some of your work," he said. "I'm not much of a judge, but I have an eye for colour. I used to do some sketching myself when I was a youngster. It came in useful afterwards for survey work and map-drawing."

He did most of the talking. Stephen answered only in monosyllables, grumpily, and pulled out his sketches with an air of indifference to his father's praise or criticism.

"What's wrong with him?" thought the Colonel. "Why is he so hostile to me? Why doesn't he see that I want his comradeship and would do anything in the world for him?"

He was secretly distressed, but tried his best to take the frown off this boy's forehead by words of admiration for his etchings and colour-work.

"That's a fine thing!" he exclaimed, picking up a pencil-drawing of Waterloo Bridge on a rainy day. "I like that! Atmospheric, eh?"

"Not bad," said Stephen, surprised that his father had picked on the thing that he liked best himself.

Conversation languished after a while, and Stephen hoped profoundly that Frank Lawton would come in and do some of the talking, or make a row on the banjo. If young Swinton came, it would be even more rotten. Stephen would have to introduce his father, and Swinton would probably blurt out something about the Punjab affair, or at least show he knew all about it. Probably he wouldn't shake hands with the man he called "a bloody murderer." As it happened, neither of them appeared. That was because they knew Sylvia wasn't coming. It was easy to see that they were both sweet on her. . . . What on earth could he say to this man who was his father?"

"What about a cup of tea?" asked the Colonel presently. "That's a jolly gas stove you have."

"You're paying for it," said Stephen, not in a grateful

tone of voice, and rather as though he had a grudge against the stove because his father *was* paying for it. That, indeed, was how he felt.

The Colonel smiled, and glanced at his son rather nervously.

"I don't mind paying for it, old man! As long as I can be of use to you in your career——"

"Do you mind condensed milk for your tea?" asked Stephen. "We don't run to fresh milk in this neighbourhood, unless one fetches it in a jug."

"I'll fetch it for you, with pleasure," said the Colonel, "if you don't like the other stuff. Nobody knows me down here, and in any case it wouldn't matter."

He wanted to show this son of his that he was willing to do any little thing for him. Youth must be served. He would go down on his knees and scrub the floor to get a smile out of this boy who was so sulky with him, for reasons unknown.

Stephen was rather staggered with that offer.

"We generally make do with the condensed stuff," he said, with a shade more civility.

"It suits me perfectly," the Colonel assured him.

Stephen made the tea, and conversation flagged again, though the Colonel tried to brighten it up by chatting about Sylvia, and asking Stephen about his work at the Slade School. Later, he told one of two anecdotes about life in India, but was aware that they did not go very well.

Stephen refused one of his Egyptian cigarettes and said he preferred a "gasper." After that there was a painful silence. It was broken by the Colonel, who suddenly threw his cigarette away, and stood up and put his hand on Stephen's shoulder.

"Look here, Stephen. This sort of thing won't do, you know. Father and son! We ought to be friends. Anything you don't like about me? Let's be open with each other."

"That's all right," said Stephen, hunching his shoulder and getting away from his father's touch under pretext of lighting another cigarette.

"No," said Colonel Fleming, "it's not all right. You've got some grudge against me, my dear boy. I hate to think that. I would like to put it right."

"It can't be put right," said Stephen in a low voice. "You can't undo things that have happened."

His father thought over those words, anxiously.

"That's perfectly true. One can't alter history, alas! But one can start afresh sometimes. It's not my fault, Stephen —not altogether—that you and I have to start with a bad handicap. I mean in our relations as father and son."

"Whose fault, then?" asked Stephen, sullenly.

Colonel Fleming was tempted to say "Your mother's fault," which was God's truth. But he wouldn't spoil this boy's love for that woman. He would be generous to her again.

"Leaving all blame on one side," he said quietly, "it's just one of life's tragedies that your mother and I had to separate, so that I'm a stranger to you. But there's no reason why we shouldn't get to know each other, and like each other. Sylvia and I are good comrades. At least, I hope so. I think she likes me a little. I want you to do the same. One day you'll inherit that old house of mine and all its traditions——"

"None of its traditions, I'm afraid," said Stephen stolidly.

That was a shock to his father.

"Why not?" he asked, rather crestfallen. "They're not bad traditions, laddie. The old stock, family pride, service and loyalty—*Semper Fidelis,* you know!—some achievements in English history——"

"In the Punjab?" asked Stephen, with a slight pallor killing the ruddiness of his skin.

Colonel Fleming stared into his eyes. They had the same kind of eyes, this father and son, yellowish-brown.

"You mean you don't approve of what I did in the Punjab? Of what I had to do for the sake of India?"

Stephen was silent for a few moments. Then he answered with a kind of sullen passion:

"It was bloody."

The Colonel put a hand to his heart for a moment, as though it hurt him. Then he answered quietly:

"Yes, it was bloody. A terrible act, old lad. It's not nice to see men—and some women, alas!—lying in a shamble after one's orders to fire on them. My orders. Not nice to have that scene in one's dreams, always before one's eyes, even in the streets of London, coming to one sometimes in a drawing-room, with pretty women there, and no smell of blood in the hot sunshine. But if it hadn't been for that act—my act—that one scene would have been forgotten now for thousands worse, for a tide of human blood in India, for wild anarchies and cruelties, unthinkable, except by those who know that welter of creeds and races and superstitions, kept in check by British rule and British justice."

"British justice?" said Stephen, with a sarcastic smile.

His father echoed his words.

"British Justice. Yes, in India, as everywhere. Stern sometimes, but never tyrannous. The greatest object-lesson of fair-play and service to humanity in the history of the world. The school of sacrifice, in which men of ours have given their lives without a thought of self, for duty's sake, in famines, in plagues, in mutinies, in jungles, in fevers and swamps, in engineering works, in all manner of service."

He told the story of that affair in the Punjab as he had told it to his sister Anne, but more in detail, so that Stephen could see the fanaticism of those crowds, and smell the heat and stench of that bazaar, and hear the shouts and tumult as they surged towards the British quarter where white women were making ready for death.

"You see it had to be done," said Colonel Fleming. "It was my absolute duty."

"It was horrible," said Stephen fiercely, with a break in his voice. "There were women in the crowd. They hadn't a chance. It was murder."

"It was Duty," answered his father. "I would do it again, if it happened again."

"That's why we can't be friends," said Stephen, staring at his easel, never once looking at his father. "We see things differently. I don't belong to your crowd and their ways of

thought. I'm utterly different. I believe in liberty and people's rights. The old traditions—damn the old traditions! I hate them! We want new traditions, if there's any sense in human beings."

He was extraordinarily like his father as he stood there, with a reddish glint in his eyes, standing squarely with his head raised. And yet not the blood that was in him from this father, nor any inheritance of instinct, made him mentally, as he was physically, like the man to whom he owed his life. Something had divided them, as one age is divided from another. There was no bridge between the old tradition and the new idea. Colonel Fleming belonged to the past; Stephen to the future. It was the tragedy of the modern world in that little studio in Chelsea.

XIX

MRS. FLEMING was very much amused with that shop in Bond Street for some weeks. It was a new toy and she was young enough to like new toys. Those *mannequin* girls, with their little airs and graces, amused her vastly, and she liked drawing them out to tell her their private stories, when there were no customers in the shop, which was quite often. Two of them had just ordinary stories of middle-class life. They had become "fed-up" (they said) with little suburban villas, and wanted "independence." They were engaged to nice young men who were something in the city, but not earning enough just yet to set up homes of their own. They spoke in a strangely affected accent which Mrs. Fleming could hardly understand at first. Everything nice was "naice." They addressed a lady, and Mrs. Fleming herself, as "Moddom." They had bobbed hair and willowy figures, and modelled their style on cinema favourites like Mary Pickford.

They hadn't an idea in their heads, Mrs. Fleming discovered, beyond the sentimentalities of newspaper fiction, and a little cunning wisdom of their own which protected them against the temptations of their age and class. Their highest ideal of life was to have a "naice tame" in the evenings, generally at the Palais de Danse in Hammersmith, or at the Marble Arch Cinema. They adored the Prince of Wales, Douglas Fairbanks and Owen Nares; and they were thoroughly good girls and a credit to their homes in Streatham Hill. But they were not so interesting as another girl who came under Mrs. Fleming's authority between ten and five o'clock. That was Mrs. Burton, who called herself Mrs. Stuart, and, legally, was still Miss Hebditch. She told her story to Mrs. Fleming one day in a burst of confidence and, half-way through, in a passion of tears.

She was the daughter of a lawyer who had died of overwork, leaving a big family penniless, with many debts.

This girl, Beatrix Hebditch, had fallen in love with a middle-aged man whom she had met in the war, when she was working at the Ministry of Munitions. He used to meet her outside the wooden huts in St. James's Park. He was a Major Burton, with a job in Whitehall. They were married in a registrar's office, and a year later she had a baby boy, who was now six weeks old. That was why she called herself Mrs. Stuart. Really, she had no right to call herself "Mrs." because the man was already married to a French girl whom he had met in Boulogne in the early part of the war, a low-class girl and utterly immoral. Not more so than her husband. He had taken to drink, knocked her about brutally, and was now serving seven years penal servitude for some swindle in the City.

The girl put her head down on Mrs. Fleming's shoulder and wept. Fortunately they were in the little room behind the curtain and there was no one else in the shop. Mrs. Fleming did her best to comfort her, but, as the girl herself said, laughing a little and wiping her tears away, "What's done can't be undone!" She spoke afterwards more calmly about the dangers of marriage and said something which rather startled Mrs. Fleming.

"When I see your daughter, Sylvia, so young and sweet and innocent, I want to warn her against falling in love. Oh, Mrs. Fleming, do tell her about things. Some men are so vile, so callous of women's lives. I think marriage is the most dangerous adventure in life. Even at the best it's such a gamble for a girl."

"I know!" said Mrs. Fleming, but she did not tell what she knew—about her own experience of marriage and its hazard. She slurred over the subject by saying that Sylvia was innocent but not ignorant. She had read a lot of queer books. And Mrs. Fleming was keeping a motherly eye on her.

But this conversation worried her a little. She had already been worried about Sylvia, lately. The girl had been going about with that boy Neville Lacey far too much. Sometimes she came home much too late after theatres and dances with him. Then she was always meeting her father, slipping

away from Montpelier Square without a word of explanation, or just a laugh and a "See you later, Mother! Don't work too hard in the old shop." It wasn't right. It wasn't fair play of that husband of hers. He wasn't sticking to the bargain he had made. He was stealing Sylvia away from her, after all. . . . He and his grand relations who would have nothing to do with her! She hardly knew anything now of how Sylvia spent her time. Even Stephen was feeling hurt, poor boy, because his sister was beginning to neglect him and leading a kind of double life, of which at least half was given to her father's side of the family.

What did they know about that young man Neville Lacey, for instance? He might be thoroughly immoral for all they knew, though Sylvia was so much amused with him and thought him so charming. Then there were those two young men in Chelsea who had chummed up with Stephen. She had met them once or twice, and had not been impressed with either of them. That young man Frank Lawton, with his pale face and shabby clothes and seedy look generally, would be a disaster as a husband, if he happened to fall in love with Sylvia, as he probably would. It was quite clear that the younger man, that Swinton boy, was already smitten. She had seen it instantly in his eyes, when she had been in the studio with Sylvia, who was absurdly kind to him. It would be just like Sylvia to marry a boy like that simply because she was sorry for him, or liked the way he played those Schubert songs, or thought it might be rather a joke to have a husband with red hair and a Trade Union father. It was impossible to tell what Sylvia would do in the way of love and marriage. She had such a peculiar sense of humour and such incurable optimism with life.

Mrs. Fleming blamed herself for having spent so much time in the shop, and for having left Sylvia so much to her own devices. She was already getting tired of the shop. It was rather boring, after the first thrill of the adventure had worn off. Worrying, too. Her brother Jack had been over-optimistic. It was costing a great deal more money than she had ever imagined, though she didn't quite know how much, as Jack had a free hand with the orders and was keep-

ing the accounts and doing all that publicity business. He had warned her that they would have to come down on the Colonel for a little more capital, and she was fighting him over that. It didn't seem fair to ask for more—so soon. He had been generous enough in that way. Jack's argument that it was the Colonel's interests as well as theirs had not convinced her. For one thing, Sylvia would be very much annoyed. She always took her father's part, especially over money matters. It was all very worrying.

Mrs. Fleming was rather worried, among other things, by her brother's extravagant use of alcohol. It was all very well not to begrudge him a whiskey now and then, as she had told Sylvia, but she was annoyed, and once or twice alarmed, when he became undoubtedly drunk, and very violent in his language. At those times he had a habit of cursing her husband as a mean skunk who had left his wife penniless and starving, while he lived like a fighting cock in India, shooting down the natives like partridges.

"It's men like that," he said once, "who make the British Empire stink in the nostrils of the world. I'm jolly glad we're able to bleed him a little in his old age. I've no compunction. Nothing that we make him spend on you, Helen, will ever pay back for his scandalous neglect."

He had had a little trouble with that word "scandalous," so that she had been bound to laugh. But all the same it was absurd of him, and irritating. She didn't like Stephen to listen to those denunciations of his father. He took them too seriously, and was already brooding over that affair in the Punjab. It put her into a difficulty. She could not very well defend her husband as though he were the noblest of men. The more she defended him in front of Stephen, the less she was justified in having deserted him. And yet she wanted to play fair.

Uncle Jack had taken a particular affection for Stephen, and long after she had gone to bed she could hear her brother's voice in lengthy monologue, telling stories of his adventures, reeling out funny anecdotes—not very nice, some of them—stirring Stephen's imagination with descriptions of life in wild places among rough men. Many times he urged

the boy to "chuck" his art—"all nonsense, old lad, and not a man's job!"—and go out to Canada or Australia, and try life on the land, under God's sky.

"You come away with me one day," he said. "I'll take you out to a little place I know on the Western Slope of the Rockies. We'll hunt a bear or two, and I'll teach you how to light a camp fire and cook your own grub. That's life! None of this effete civilisation, this whining of unemployed men waiting for jobs that won't come, this make-believe of prosperity in a country that is doomed. Liberty! Honest work for strong men! The survival of the fittest, and to hell with the weak! Better than art in Chelsea, or Paris models in Bond Street. . . . Those infernal *mannequins,* with their airs and graces! I mustn't call them 'my dear.' Oh, no! It's 'Please, Miss Tuck, and would you mind getting me the catalogue?' Or 'If it wouldn't be troubling you too much, Miss Goodrich, would you be good enough to pass the scissors.' I'd like to strangle those girls. Dolls! Affected minxes! Stuck-up little bits of nonsense! . . . Gosh!"

It was curious that he always came back to those *mannequins* as the objects of his rage and derision, after denouncing civilisation and its iniquities.

It was obvious to Mrs. Fleming that her brother was also getting tired of the adventure in Bond Street. He did not come to the shop for several days together, and excused himself by saying that he had taken on a little business in the City which needed attention. He had a moody look in his eyes, which were also becoming rather bloodshot, and he was not so amusing as he used to be when they first arrived in London. What with one thing and another, Mrs. Fleming found that her nerves were getting rather "edgy" again. She had a little nerve-storm quite suddenly one evening when she came home and found Sylvia dressing very elaborately before her mirror. She was in a white evening frock which she had bought as a birthday present from her father, and she was fastening a pearl necklace round her throat.

"Where are you off to this evening?" asked Mrs. Fleming. She asked the question quietly and amiably, but was aware

of some queer spasm of nerviness making her heart beat.

"Well," said Sylvia, smiling at her image in the mirror, "I've got to look my best to-night. Father is taking me, at last, to one of the receptions at Burford House. It's going to be rather a grand affair, I believe. Neville's coming too, in place of Stephen, who hates that kind of thing."

Mrs. Fleming knew that she was in for a nerve-storm. She tried to control it. Why shouldn't her beautiful Sylvia go to Burford House with her father? Why this absurd sense of jealousy and anger? Yes, anger!

"Sylvia," she said in a strained voice, "I don't want to be a spoil-sport, or anything like that. You know that's not my character. But I would rather you didn't go to that reception."

Sylvia was surprised, but did not take her words very seriously.

"Why, Mother? What's wrong with it?"

"I object to your going," said Mrs. Fleming. "I ask you not to go, Sylvia."

Sylvia put just the tiniest touch of powder on her cheeks, and was glad Aunt Elizabeth wasn't looking.

"The taxi will be here in five minutes," she explained, calmly. "Stephen has gone to fetch it."

"No!" said Mrs. Fleming. "I shall send it away again. I don't think it's fair, Sylvia. It's not the way you used to love me."

"Oh, nonsense, Mother!" laughed Sylvia.

Mrs. Fleming had a sudden rush of tears in her eyes.

"You're slipping away from me. That father of yours is stealing you away. I knew how it would be. You don't care a bit about home life now. You never want to stay quietly with Stephen and me. Besides . . ."

"Besides what, Mother?"

"Don't you understand? Why should I be left here in the lurch all the time? You know very well I can't go to Burford House. It's not very pleasant to think that my daughter goes to houses to which her own mother wouldn't be admitted, and meets people who would cut her dead if they saw

her. It's humiliating, Sylvia. I don't think it's kind of you, or decent."

Sylvia looked at the mother she adored with a smiling impatience.

"Really, Mother, it's too late in the day to argue all that! It's most unfortunate, I admit. But that's how things have worked out, owing to past history. I don't think you ought to keep me from going to father's side of the family now and then. As for neglecting you and Stephen, that's ridiculous. Father has been very kind."

"Your father!" said Mrs. Fleming. "It's always your father now. You don't care anything about your mother!"

She burst into tears, and cried more bitterly when Sylvia put her arms about her and said, "Poor Mother! Poor, jealous, ridiculous Mother!"

But when Stephen whistled from the street below, Sylvia released her mother from her arms and jumped up hurriedly.

"Sorry, Mother, but I must be going!"

When she went into the taxi she looked so much like Cinderella after the fairy godmother's careful work with the wand, that even Stephen was abashed.

"Not a bad frock!" he said. "You look like a blinking princess."

"Father paid for it," said Sylvia brightly; and that took the glamour out of it for Stephen.

XX

SYLVIA'S friendship with Neville Lacey had made life more enjoyable for both of them. As Neville had observed during that week-end visit to Oakwood Court, they both laughed at the same things, and that is a mystic tie of comradeship between a young man and woman with a playful sense of humour. Doubtless other people might have failed to see much wit in their conversation and have missed the point of jokes which amused them so much. It was mostly a game of words, a kind of verbal fencing to break down each other's guard in preposterous arguments spoken with mock gravity, until Sylvia, as a rule, abandoned all defence in irresistible laughter.

Neville claimed that he had won the game when that happened, and he liked winning. It must be admitted that he scored most points, having more self-control and a real gift for intellectual absurdities which he advanced with an air of complete sincerity. It was Sylvia's ambition, she said, to find the real Neville Lacey underneath that mask of Court Jester, and she dared him to drop the mask for just a moment now and then, so that she might discover whether he had any serious view of life, any honest ambition, any sincerity at all. She cross-examined him one day when they sat under an oak-tree in Richmond Park, as lonely there—except for a herd of fallow deer—as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Was there any real Neville Lacey, or, if he took off his mask, would there be just nothing at all—a mere void?

In an answer to that question he gave a picture of himself without his mask on, and elaborated a very complete portrait of St. Francis of Assisi, with a touch of Lloyd George, which was obviously absurd.

She questioned him about his views on politics, with reference to that scene in the studio with Sidney Swinton. Was he really a Die-Hard, like her father, or an Advanced Democrat, like the "Boy from Battersea"?

He confessed, with sham sincerity, as usual, that he agreed entirely with both sides. He was a sort of Duke of Northumberland permeated with the spirit of Ramsey MacDonald. When he was in the presence of the old régime he was inclined to be revolutionary and socialistic. When he sat with democrats he was all for aristocratic traditions and an autocracy supported by tanks and machine-guns. When he was alone with his own soul—as, for instance, when he was taking his morning bath—he was so confused with this dual nature that he was inclined to go back to bed and give up the hopeless task of converting humanity to his charitable combination of opposing forces.

"The truth is," said Sylvia, "that you're an intellectual hedger and trimmer. You make fun of both sides and won't take anything seriously."

"The truth is," explained Neville, "that I see the other fellow's point of view so perfectly that I can't be a fanatic. I'm a tolerant sceptic. I look on at life as a Punch-and-Judy show. Its violence distresses me at times, especially when Punch works himself into a passion and lays about with a stick, but as long as I'm not being beaten I'll pay my penny for the entertainment."

"Aren't you going to do something?" asked Sylvia urgently. "Are you going through life as a looker-on, with a superior smile on your face?"

"What *can* I do?" he enquired.

Sylvia suggested that there was nothing he couldn't do, if he really wanted to. But he disagreed.

"I have an allowance of three hundred a year from a father who is poor but dishonest. Utterly immoral in all financial matters, as I think you ought to warn your own honoured parent, whom he is now trying to bleed for one of his bogus companies. If I take a job in the Civil Service I should be taking the bread out of the mouth of some poor devil who needs it more than I do. Also I should spoil the crease in my trousers for no benefit to my country."

"You might enter Parliament," said Sylvia.

"To do what?" he asked. "If I speak like the Duke of Northumberland one day and Ramsey MacDonald the next,

or even like both of them in the same speech, I should annoy my constituents, and possibly cause a riot in the House."

"Why not go back to the Army? Anything's better than lounging."

"Impossible," said Neville. "They've already reduced the Brigade of Guards, and in any case I should get shell-shock at the voice of a sergeant-major. What's left for me to do? Tell me, child."

"You might marry a nice girl, and have beautiful children, and bring them up as a credit to your country, and a blessing to your old age."

Neville Lacey thought that idea the most impossible of all. It was an amusing temptation, but he thrust it from his vision as an honest man.

"I may be careless," he said, "but I am not cruel. Imagine that nice girl trying to live with me on three hundred a year. Why, even now, as an ascetic bachelor, I'm laden with debts! The smallest flat in London costs half my income. The poor girl would have to dress in the cast-off clothes of Aunt Elizabeth! Awful thought! . . . And those beautiful children——"

"I'd love to nurse them," said Sylvia.

He liked the idea of her nursing them, but considered the future.

"How am I going to educate them, except at a Council school where their poor little lives will be made intolerable by the class intolerance of the other kids, annoyed by the accent of Belgravia. And having educated them to like the things I like—the little beauties and graces of life—how am I going to defend myself when they turn round one day and say, 'Father'—or 'dear old bean'—'we didn't ask to be brought into the world. What are you going to do about it?'"

"Do about what?" asked Sylvia.

"Do about the financial support necessary to provide them with the means of getting the things they like—the little beauties and graces, the fun of life, the satisfaction of their ridiculous but urgent desires."

"But surely you will bring them up to earn their living?"

suggested Sylvia. "The children of a parasite needn't be parasites."

"That's exactly what they must be," said Neville, "unless they can escape from those social traditions which belong to the family tree of which I am an unworthy and somewhat blighted sprig. How can the granddaughter of an Earl become a barmaid, or anything useful like that? How can the son of an Honourable become the driver of a taxi-cab? Failing a revolution, it seems impossible."

"You're as class-conscious as Sidney Swinton," said Sylvia. "I don't believe in that dual personality of yours. I believe you're instinctively a Die-Hard, like your father."

"I'm torn between conflicting loyalties," said Neville. "New ideas—old traditions."

In that sentence, spoken airily, Sylvia suspected that for a moment he had lifted the mask. Sometimes she guessed that underneath all his whimsicality, even in the midst of his most outrageous jests, he was touched by a melancholy which he hid as his secret of secrets. It was perhaps, she thought, the sadness of a man who had seen many of his best friends killed in war, and now in peace found only disillusionment and boredom and mockery. She had read a French novel about a man like that. He had been an ardent soldier, ready to die for France. But when peace came, with its politics and its corruption and profiteering in the old battlefields, he shot himself through the heart. She hoped Neville wouldn't do that. The thought made her sad for a moment, until he made her laugh again at some new nonsense.

Perhaps she was all wrong in that idea of a hidden melancholy. No one else suspected it. The two Russian girls at the tea-party in his rooms confided to her that they thought Neville incapable of serious thought. "He mocks at us as he mocks at life," said one of them. Even one of the young Guards officers rather tired of his "rotting," as he called it, and said, "Can't you give us a mental rest, old boy? Let's be dull for a bit and talk gravely about the weather, like God-fearing Englishmen."

"By all means!" said Neville. "I've always thought that our climate has produced that character which has enabled

our races to govern all other races with divinely-appointed wisdom. It's essentially a climate of compromise and fair play. Just as you thing it's going to be fine, it's wet. Just as you think it's going to be wet, it's fine. It abhors extreme action, anything fanatical in the way of a heat-wave or a prolonged frost it——"

"For heaven's sake, eat something!" said the young officer. "Those buns of yours look jolly good as conversation-stoppers."

Those friends of his seemed to like his company, in spite of his refusal to be serious, or because of it. They called round at that small flat of his in Lyall Street at odd hours between breakfast-time and midnight, and sat about for a while smoking his cigarettes, exchanging comments on the latest show, the latest sporting event, or the last happenings in their social set, in dispassionate voices, before "buzzing off," as they called it, to unknown destinations for unimportant purposes.

Sylvia came to know these young men, who were all very kind to her, and seemed surprised to find her there. They were all ex-officers of the Great War, some of whom bore its marks on their bodies. One man, Billy Merstham, had lost an arm; another—Dick Furley—had left a leg behind in Flanders; though these losses didn't seem to make any difference to their activities in the way of golf and other kinds of sport. But the war itself had hurt them in other ways, it seemed. It had impoverished their families, and left them without any purpose in life or any enthusiasm. They seemed to be drifting, waiting for something to happen, and expecting it to be unpleasant. Sylvia could not quite make out what it was they expected to happen. Another war? Well, some of them seemed to think so. They spoke darkly now and then of new forms of poison-gas, a war in the air, when the civilian population would be the first "to get it in the neck"—and "damned good job too," as one of them remarked.

Occasionally they hinted at revolution in England, and chaffed each other about the part they would play when it happened. They agreed that if they didn't take sides they

would probably be strung up anyhow, and first of all. But some of them had decided to take sides. Billy Merstham, with an empty sleeve, had made up his mind to join the Fascisti who were being privately organised in England. He would volunteer for the tank section, and take great pleasure in shooting down the Bolshies or the leaders of the Trade Unions.

On the other hand, Dick Furley, who had lost a leg, and did very well without it, owing to an artificial limb, had decided to offer his services to the Labour crowd. It would give him the greatest joy, he said, to pepper the profiteers who had made great fortunes out of the war and dodged their income-tax returns. Above all, he would like to have a hand in shooting up the newspaper offices and stopping their machinery of lies by a dose of high-explosives. He thought it might do a lot of good to little old England.

"Well, you and I will find ourselves on the opposite sides of the barricade," said Billy Merstham to Dick Furley, and they both laughed as though at a very good joke. It was fairly clear, indeed, that they were not speaking seriously, and yet Sylvia suspected that beneath the nonsense they talked deliberately there must be some touch of sincerity. They were like Neville Lacey, hiding themselves behind masks, but not so humourously.

She spoke to him about them all, one evening, when she was curled up on his sofa after dinner, while he sat in a big chair, with his head against a purple cushion and his eyes half closed but smiling at her.

"Those friends of yours, they make me shiver a little! Such tired young men—so disillusioned, so melancholy, underneath all their 'rotting,' as you call it! Can't they fall in love, or get keen on some kind of work, or go mad on art or something? Anything rather than their pathetic pessimism. Explain them to me!"

Neville laughed at her in that rather patronising way he had sometimes, as though she were an innocent child who asks the impertinent questions of childhood.

"It's hard to explain. You wouldn't understand. You're too young, pretty one."

"Oh, well, if you think I'm as stupid as all that . . ."

He reassured her.

"No offence meant! I've a high respect for your brilliant intellect, almost too advanced for your age and quite alarming sometimes."

"Thanks!" said Sylvia. "But what's the explanation?"

"It's like this," said Neville. "Those poor pals of mine, who cost me such a lot in cigarettes, and seek my campany because I make them laugh—that's my little mission in life!—belong to the period of the Great War which is now remote in history. They used up all their enthusiasm in that episode and it left them rather exhausted."

"I can't understand why," said Sylvia. "They're still young."

"They spent themselves. Gave everything they had in vital energy. Now they find themselves rather sold, as you might say. The little heroes of the Great War thought they were fighting for noble ideals of liberty and fair play, and they find that after the war the people they saved at some risk and discomfort make a mockery of those ideals and of their service, and that everything is in a more hopeless and squalid mess than if the war had never been fought. That disheartens the poor lads. Takes the stuffing out of them. But it all goes deeper than that. Very hard to explain."

"Life's still wonderful," said Sylvia. "What about love?"

Neville's smile was ironical.

"Oh, they know what love means all right. Love in wartime! They grabbed at it wherever they could find it, in a hurry, because they might be killed before they knew the glory of it. And it didn't work out very well, in some cases. Take Billy Merstham. His little wife whom he married after a week on leave—I know the kid—got rather fed up with things in 1917, when he hadn't been home for six months, and amused herself with another fellow in a way which led to divorce in 1920. There were other cases like that, or worse than that. War love was rather too rapid. It didn't always wear very well. Some of those pals of mine find it rather threadbare, or else have memories they want to forget."

"There's work," said Sylvia.

"What kind of work?"

"Any kind of work."

Neville shook his head and raised a forefinger as though reproving a pupil who has forgotten the rules.

"I asked what kind of work? For young gentlemen of the Universities and public-schools who spent four and a half years in saving their country, which has no kind of job to offer them in peace."

"Why not?" asked Sylvia, anxious to get at the truth of all this. "Surely England needs men of education?"

"Not that kind of education," said Neville. "In the old days they went into the army and stayed there. Now it's an overcrowded profession, and there's no room for most of them—and they don't like the idea of the next war. Or they went into diplomacy. That needs a private income which their fathers can't afford, after paying income-tax and death-duties. Or they managed their estates and did a bit of farming in a gentlemanly way. Now the estates are being sold and cut up into lots for cheap bungalows and jerry-built villas. So they are cut off again. Derelicts in a time of social revolution, left high and dry on the beach of ingratitude and disillusion, looking back on the past—those four and a half years—as aged men dream over the hey-dey of youth, regarding the future doubtfully, as an uncertain thing, full of damnable possibilities, and more unpleasantness. Have I explained? No; there's a lot more which lies deep and inarticulate in their simple souls."

Sylvia uncurled herself on the sofa.

"Neville," she said "you've been telling me the truth about yourself! I've found you out at last. It's your story."

Neville looked slightly embarrassed. A little flush coloured his fair skin.

"It's English history in my crowd," he answered.

"Did you grab at love, Neville?" asked Sylvia.

"Oh, I had adventures," he replied lightly. "Rather foolish and unsuccessful. I've forgotten all that."

"Tell me," she said coaxingly. "I want to know. As a friend and a cousin I think I ought to know. Having

laughed at the same things with you, I want to weep at the same things with you. It's the test of friendship."

"No cause for weeping," he said. "Only another case for laughter."

He hesitated, watched her face, and decided to tell her.

"It's fair that you should know. I should be rather a cad not to tell you. Perhaps I ought to have told you before, except that one keeps these things to oneself as much as possible."

"Neville," said Sylvia, rather breathlessly, "did you make one of those war marriages?"

"No," he said. "I had a lucky escape. Or perhaps it was Kitty's luck."

"Who was Kitty?" asked Sylvia.

Neville laughed in a queer voice, and hesitated again.

"Kitty was the girl who happened to be my nurse in Number Twenty-four General Hospital at Etaples, when I had my first wound. She was very kind, used to stick the little bit of glass in my mouth to take my temperature, and I fell in love with her hands. After that, when I got a bit stronger and could sit up in bed, I fell in love with her face. Rather a jolly, laughing face. Of course I made every old joke to her, and she seemed to like them. We arranged to meet in London when I was sent home for a spell and she came back on leave. We had a wonderful week together, and became formally engaged with our parent's blessing."

"And afterwards?" asked Sylvia. She was excited by this revelation of Neville's past. It was the first time he had breathed a word about that girl Kitty.

"Afterwards," said Neville. "Well, I had rather bad luck in the Flanders show of 1917. I got a bit of gas in Glencorse Wood, and it blinded me for a time."

"Blinded you!" Sylvia spoke with horror in her voice.

"Yes. I was stone-blind for three weeks. At least, I had to wear a bandage over my eyes. The doctors were inclined to think the sight was destroyed. It was that mustard gas. Rather nasty stuff."

Sylvia caught hold of Neville's hand and put it to her lips.

"Poor old Neville! How perfectly frightful!"

"It put the wind up me," he said quietly. "I was an awful coward. Not to see, you know—the jolly old world, trees, birds, light on the water, the first glint of green when spring comes, faces like yours, sweet coz. You've no idea! I used to curse—and cry like a baby. I was so helpless. Couldn't do a damn thing for myself. Used to knock into things. Used to get the horrors."

Sylvia's tears fell on his hand.

"And Kitty?" she asked.

"Oh, Kitty! I forgot. We were talking about her, weren't we? Well, she was splendid. She chucked her job in France to be with me. She used to lead me about, and all that. Her eyes were my eyes. She used to describe things so that I could see them. I loved her with a kind of adoration. She wanted to marry me at once, but of course I couldn't let her."

"Why not?" asked Sylvia.

"Not such a cad! I don't believe in making a martyr of a girl, and it's that to be married to a blind man."

"I should have married you, Neville!" said Sylvia emotionally.

He smiled and patted her hand.

"I shouldn't have let you. I didn't let Kitty, and she was glad to escape."

"Escape? Run away from all that love means?"

Neville took a sharp breath, but laughed again.

"I knew by the sound of her voice that she funked it, though she wanted to be loyal. And I knew the man she really loved. They had been together during that spell of mine in Flanders. He was a doctor in the General Hospital. They had got fond of each other. I heard them talking one night when he was home on leave. I stood close to them, listening, and wanting to know. It was a question of divided loyalties again—loyalty to a blind man to whom Kitty was engaged, or loyalty to a lover with whom she had gone rather far."

"Oh, lord!" said Sylvia. "Was she as bad as that?"

Neville did not agree with that condemnation.

"It wasn't badness. It was the adventure of war, the

passion of life stirred by all that business of death. Kitty loved us both, and was sorry for me. I decided the question for her. Her loyalty to me would have been rather spoilt by that other allegiance. . . . I went to her wedding, with my sight back again, so that I could see how pretty she looked. Funny, wasn't it?"

"Frightful!" said Sylvia. "Horrible!"

"One of life's little ironies," observed Neville.

"One of its tragedies," she said.

Neville shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

"Better, as it worked out. I couldn't have kept Kitty in any comfort. I should have found out about the other man and been morbidly jealous. Now they're quite happy, in a humdrum way, with a good practice in Harley Street and two nice babies. I'm glad I listened that night, though it seemed caddish."

Sylvia's eyes were smudgy with tears, and she put her arm round Neville's shoulder in a sisterly way.

"Oh, Neville, I think it's wonderfully brave of you to hide all that under your mask! They all think you such a jester, and yet they must remember how you went blind that time."

"Only a few," said Neville. "I don't talk of it, and some never knew. They had their own wounds, and their own little troubles. Besides, it's old history. The war? A thousand years ago. We've forgotten it. I've forgotten—Kitty—and all the rest of it. We're not the same men who did those things. Those men were our ghosts, haunting us sometimes, but no longer real, not ourselves as we are now. It's all different, life and everything, and, on the whole, not so good, not so vital, if you see what I mean?"

"I see what you mean," said Sylvia, "but I see that it's all wrong. You must get hold of life again, and make it vital. Can't you put some meaning into it, Neville? I'd like to see you caught up by enthusiasm, pushing everything on one side for some great ideal or ambition. Or falling in love again passionately with some splendid woman worthy of you."

He thought that a very great joke, and laughed at her with a real sincerity of mirth.

"You're the funniest child! I'm so glad I met you that day at Oakwood Court, Cousin Sylvia."

He looked at her with a smiling tenderness.

"If I weren't old enough to be your bachelor uncle, and if I weren't as poor as a church mouse, and if I thought it was playing the game generally, which it isn't . . ."

"Well?" asked Sylvia.

"Well," he answered, after a slight hesitation, which he disguised by striking a match for his unlit cigarette, "I might be tempted to fall in love with you, passionately, as you suggest. Would that appeal to you at all, after what I've told you about Kitty, and so on?"

Sylvia considered the question rather cautiously.

"Does that 'so on' cover other episodes, before Kitty and afterwards?"

"One or two," he admitted. "Nothing that I couldn't tell you, one day. Rather foolish affairs. But what about my question with all those 'ifs'?"

He seemed to wait for her answer rather anxiously.

It was quite frank when it came.

"There's nothing in all those 'ifs'," she said. "You're not old enough to be my bachelor uncle, and poverty doesn't frighten me in the least. And that story of Kitty makes me want to cry for you. But, all the same, Neville dear . . ."

"Well?" he asked.

"All the same, there can't be that kind of love between you and me, Neville."

"Why not?" he enquired placidly, with only the slightest hint of disappointment.

Sylvia stated reasons which seemed convincing to herself.

"Because we're too much like each other. Because we laugh at the same things. And because I feel exactly like a cousin to you—which I am."

"Those seem to me to be excellent reasons for making a match of it," he remarked. "Barring those 'ifs', and especially the 'if' about the church mouse."

"We should make the same jokes at the breakfast-table," said Sylvia. "It would never do!"

"What would you say if I told you that I *had* fallen passionately in love with you?" asked Neville quietly, as though putting an abstract proposition. "What would you say if I told you that I wanted to kiss you now more than anything in the world?"

"I should say you were laughing behind that mask of yours. You can't take me in with that kind of nonsense. But if you want to kiss me ever so little, you're perfectly at liberty. I've no objection whatever—as a cousin."

It was then that he kissed her on the lips, not passionately, but rather nicely, though he seemed ashamed of it afterwards.

"A cousinly kiss," he said, rather shyly. "Let's leave it at that. And now you had better be going home, my dear. It's getting rather late, and, cousins as we are, people might talk."

He went downstairs with her and put her into a taxi-cab, and paid the fare in advance, as though she were a schoolgirl.

XXI

IT was for Sylvia's sake that Colonel Fleming went with her to the reception at Burford House, and afterwards he regretted it, for more reasons than one. He had put on his orders and decorations—C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O.—which they had not taken from him after his "disgrace," and looked a distinguished figure as he stood under the portico of the house in St. James's Court, waiting for the arrival of his daughter. It was his first appearance at any social function since his return from India, and he felt nervous about it. That cousin of his was a Liberal sentimentalist, one of those "idealists" with whom he had nothing in common, because he disbelieved utterly in their ideals.

He was convinced they would bring the Empire to ruin. He always had been convinced of it, and the pace seemed to be quickening. No Empire in history, he thought, had ever been held together by sentimentality and weakness, or democratic principles applied to government. And his cousin Burford had not backed him up in the House of Lords during that preposterous debate on the Punjab affair. On the contrary, he had made a wishy-washy speech and talked nonsense about the need of liberal principles in India, "which he feared would be greatly set back by that regrettable and lamentable affair, following upon the Amritsar atrocities." Claptrap! Insincere and disloyal rubbish!

Standing there under the striped awning, Colonel Fleming regretted his promise to Sylvia to join her at this reception. Burford would probably give him the cold shoulder, or say something riling which would tempt him to answer sharply. And those guests of his! What extraordinary people! Who on earth were they all, and what had happened to English Society? A number of motor-cars rolled up, with people properly dressed for an occasion of this kind—women such as he had known in the old days, in silks and satins, with jewels in their hair; men like himself, with orders and decora-

tions—but quite a crowd came on foot, as though they had travelled in buses from somewhere, and many had not even taken the trouble to put on evening dress. The women among them were dowdy. Some of them had short hair like men, and rasping voices, as he heard when they passed. Some of the men looked like civil servants in their office clothes, or literary fellows with pale faces and watery eyes and narrow chests. "Intellectuals," Colonel Fleming supposed gloomily. Some of his cousin Burford's idealists and Socialistic Liberals. Probably some Labour fellows among them! He felt extremely uncomfortable, and wished more than ever that he hadn't come. He would be utterly out of place among people like this. Like a fish out of water—a very old-fashioned fish! He didn't speak their language. They would probably think him "reactionary"—whatever that might be.

Colonel Fleming was very much relieved when Neville Lacey touched him on the arm and said, "Hullo, Colonel! Hasn't Sylvia turned up yet?"

"No," he answered, "I'm waiting for her, and very glad to see you, my dear boy. If it wouldn't disappoint Sylvia, I should have a mind to turn tail and beat a retreat. These extraordinary people! Who are they all? What's happened to little old England?"

He grasped Neville's arm and whispered his questions lest they should be overheard.

Neville glanced at a party passing them under the awning to the open door of Burford House, where two footmen stood, not wearing the old livery, as the Colonel noticed, not even with powdered hair.

"Rather a mixed crowd," said Neville, "but quite harmless. They're wearing the wrong kind of clothes, of course —one of those fellows has a ready-made tie, if I mistake not!—but what they lack in tailoring they make up in faith, hope and charity. They're what you might call the Intellectuals."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Colonel. "I thought so!"

Neville laughed, and continued his revelation.

"League of Nations people, Prohibitionists, Labour leaders

and their respectable and earnest wives, Journalists, and so on. The people who believe in the progress of humanity and the possibility of universal peace."

He spoke in his usual airy way, with an affectation of superiority, and smiled at the Colonel's anxious face.

"Good heavens!" muttered Colonel Fleming. "I find it all very distressing. Do you mean to tell me that journalists are allowed to come to receptions like this? Those Press fellows who report private conversations and make mischief in their filthy rags?"

"Oh, lord, yes," said Neville. "They're very respectable nowadays, and move in high circles. Some of them are peers and knights and things."

"I have been told so," said the Colonel. "Incredible!"

He seemed to stare back at the past across the street looking towards St. James's Place with its old brick walls.

"When I used to come here as a young man, in my uncle's time, it was very different from all this. It wasn't easy to get an invitation to Burford House, I can tell you! A journalist would have been sent round to the servants' entrance to get a list of guests from the head footman—a list of the people who governed England and the Empire by right of blood, tradition and service."

Neville Lacey laughed quietly.

"*Nous avons changé tout cela!* It's all different now, sir. People talk about the coming of a social revolution. I rather fancy it's arrived already. The old caste has lost its privileges. It's democracy's day out."

"It's the end of England as I knew it and loved it," said the Colonel.

"The beginning of another England, and rather interesting," Neville suggested. "Those Labour fellows are going to get a move on. It won't be dull."

The Colonel glanced at him sharply.

"You're not bitten with that Socialistic humbug, I hope, Neville? That treachery to the good old traditions?"

Neville looked at the old Colonel and his stern, troubled face with an amusement in which there was a touch of pity. He understood his point of view, his distress, his sense of

finding the old world slipping beneath his feet. It was his weakness to understand and sympathise with the old loyalties hopelessly out of date, utterly absurd after a war that had broken down all the old walls and let in a tide of new ideas, new hopes, and new liberties.

"The world won't stand still," he said. "One has to adapt oneself to new conditions. Very uncomfortable to those who belong to the old régime, of course. . . . But here comes Sylvia."

He hurried forward to give Sylvia his hand as she jumped out of a taxi-cab in that frock which Stephen had said made her look like a "blinking princess"—her father's birthday present.

"You're looking wonderful," said Neville, and she told him she felt it. She was also very pleased with her father's appearance.

"My word, Father! Talk about Sir Galahad—I feel ever so proud of you, in those medals of yours!"

He liked her pride in him, and a troubled look passed from his face as he kissed her hand.

"Let's have a look at this menagerie," he said. "You're the only girl I've seen who reminds me of the gracious days when beauty came to this old house."

"A pretty compliment, Father," laughed Sylvia, "but hard on the present generation, don't you think?"

They followed in the procession up the steps of Burford House, and then, having left their coats and Sylvia's cloak, passed up the great marble stairway to where Lord and Lady Burford stood receiving their guests. Sylvia noticed with some disappointment that many of the women were wearing workaday clothes, though some had touched them up with lace shawls or "fichus." It rather spoilt the picture in this noble house with its gilded furniture and polished floors and glittering candelabra. But she liked the appearance of distinguished-looking men wearing stars and medals like her father and jewelled crosses suspended from broad ribbons round their collars.

Neville spoke to her.

"You'll like Aunt Peggy. She's a good sort and typically

American. Came from California, with some very useful dollars."

"Which is Lord Burford?" asked Sylvia.

"You'd better call him Uncle," said Neville. "It's that fellow on the top of the staircase, with sandy hair and side-whiskers like an under-groom or a racing tout. That blue rag round his chest is the Most Noble Order of the Garter."

"It ought to be the Order of the Thistle," said Colonel Fleming. "One of the biggest asses——"

Sylvia gave a little squeal of laughter, and said, "Hush Father!"

Lady Burford's voice, resonant, gay, unmistakably American, rang out above the chatter on the stairway, even above the loud, full-throated voice of the flunkey, an old man like a Mormon elder, in black livery and braided epaulettes, who announced each name.

"His Excellency the French Ambassador."

Lady Burford greeted him as an old friend.

"Nice to see you in this crush, Vicomte. You look worried over that franc of yours. We shall have to prop it up somehow, or you'll be undercutting us in all our markets."

"His Excellency the Italian Ambassador."

A little black-headed man bowed low over her hand and said, "Charming lady!" just as Count Goldoni used to say to Sylvia and Mrs. Fleming.

Lady Burford tapped his shoulder with her fan.

"None of your Italian romance on this staircase, Marchese. I'm a respectable married woman."

"His Lordship the Bishop of Bath and Wells."

Lady Burford greeted him with familiarity and enthusiasm.

"Hullo, Bishop! I haven't forgotten that naughty story you told me last time we met. It made even Burford laugh, so it must have been good."

It was then that Colonel Fleming and his daughter were announced, and Sylvia's quick eyes noticed that at her father's name several people turned their heads to look at him in a hostile way, and that a slight shade passed into the smiling

eyes of Lady Burford. But she greeted him politely and with kindness.

"Glad to see you here, Colonel. And is this beautiful girl your daughter?"

She caught hold of Sylvia's hand and whispered to her:

"One of my English nieces, eh? That husband of mine seems to be the uncle of England. We'll have a chat later, when I've finished with this crowd. You'll find them mixed but interesting. Women Liberals, Labour, the Union of Democratic Control, literary men . . ."

She turned to Neville and gave him a tap on the chest.

"Looking as supercilious as ever, and just as beautiful. When are you going to speak for me on Prohibition?"

"When I give up drinking, dear Aunt," said Neville. "And is there anything stronger than lemonade to-night?"

"Some excellent coffee!" said Lady Burford, with her frank, good-natured laugh.

She passed them on to her husband, and said, "Some of your relatives, Johnny."

Lord Burford gave a limp hand to Colonel Fleming.

"Well, Dick! Settling down in the old country? How's Oakwood, and Cousin Elizabeth?"

He was not cordial, and had uneasy eyes.

"I find England changed," answered Colonel Fleming, rather stiffly. "New ideas and new fashions. Can't say I like them. . . . But this is my daughter, Sylvia."

"Your daughter?" said Lord Burford vaguely. He seemed to grope back in his mind to forgotten chapters of family history, and then coughed nervously, and said, "Ah, yes! Your daughter . . . I remember."

He shook hands with Sylvia and said, "You'll find lemonade and things in one of the rooms."

It was not easy to get to the lemonade and things, if they had wanted to. The rooms were crowding up with guests, most of whom seemed to know each other, and especially those who were not in evening dress. Colonel Fleming became separated from Sylvia and Neville, because he disliked thrusting his way through the groups. His eyes roved round these rooms for any old friends who might be glad to see

him and greet him cordially, but there was not a soul he knew. He was annoyed with his cousin Burford's coldness. He had given him a limp hand like a damp fish. Didn't even remember at once that he had a daughter, and wasn't more than barely civil to Sylvia. A mean soul, in spite of his precious idealism and pose of liberality.

Colonel Fleming listened to the conversation about him, and didn't like it. He was wedged next to a group of young men and women who were discussing the political situation.

"The Labour crowd have a very good chance next time," said one of the young men, who had not the decency to put on evening dress, though he looked like a gentleman. "Then things will begin to move, if they have any pluck."

"About time, too," said one of the young women, who had cut her hair short. "If they don't do something soon, for the unemployed, there'll be a row in little old England. It's an absolute disgrace. You've no idea of the conditions down in Bermondsey. Half the men out of work and the women in despair. People talk about the dole! What's the good of a dole that just keeps men physically unfit? It's only a Labour Government that can handle a situation like that. Otherwise—the social revolution."

"Well, a little social upheaval—without bloodshed, of course—wouldn't do us any harm," said one of the young men. "I'm all for it. The Old Men are getting into the saddle again and leading us straight back to reaction. I confess I'm an out-and-out Labour man. Burford's sentimental Liberalism is only hedging. Girondin stuff! We want a touch of the real thing!"

"I'm a moderate man," said a young man with a lock of black hair falling over his forehead. "I've seen too much of war to dally with the idea of revolution. But I shall certainly vote Labour next time. The ex-service men haven't had a fair deal. It makes me rage. And now the old generals who put them into the shambles are trying to raise Fascisti in England, to shoot down fellows who go out on strike for a living wage. That sort of thing makes one squirm!"

"Well, you needn't worry," said the girl with short hair. "Labour is winning all along the line."

Colonel Fleming tried not to listen, but could not help overhearing that conversation. It made his blood boil. A Labour Government in England! Incredible and horrible. And yet they took it for granted. It seemed to him that the young people were talking high treason—sheer, undiluted Bolshevism—and not even lowering their voices. What was happening, when talk like that could be heard in Burford House? Thirty years ago he had stood in this very room when the Prince of Wales was there. His uncle had been Govenor-General of India. There was not a man or woman there who would have not died to defend the Constitution, the Throne, the old traditions of loyalty. Some of them *had* died. Now these poisonous young people were talking of Labour Government, and the right of workingmen to strike for higher wages, and the blessing of a revolution without bloodshed. He was very sorry he had come. He was inclined to ask young Neville to look after Sylvia and take her home, so that he could go.

Presently he heard his own name mentioned. It was when he had moved into the little room that had been his uncle's library, and where a portrait of his mother still hung over the cabinet in the corner, as he saw with a pang of emotion, as though he had met her dear ghost.

"I heard Colonel Fleming's name mentioned."

"Yes. I wonder he has the courage to show himself in decent society."

Colonel Fleming glanced sharply over his left shoulder. The words had been spoken by a tall, ascetic-looking man, talking to a lady in black, with white hair and a rather handsome, worn-looking face.

"He's a sort of relative of Lord Burford's," said the tall man. "I'm very glad that Burford had the courage and common decency to denounce that Punjab affair in the Lords."

"Rather feebly," said the lady in black. "It was one of the blackest deeds in English history. I cannot think of any punishment too severe for such cold-blooded murder of poor unarmed people."

"If he has any conscience," said the tall man, "he must be suffering the tortures of the damned."

Colonel Fleming, standing quite close to these people, swayed slightly, and felt his face become ashen. That was how the world was talking about him! These people who didn't understand, who didn't know! For a moment or two this familiar room, with its cut-glass candelabra, its gilded mirrors, its polished floors, faded from his vision. He was out in India again, with the sun in his eyes and the noise of a raging mob about him. They were shouting and screaming down there in the native quarter. There were thirty thousand of them, and he had a little garrison of half a battalion. They had killed three of his men and some civilians that morning, and their bodies lay in the sun under the white wall. It was Sergeant-Major Smith who brought the news of the mob advancing. They were moving towards the women's quarters, on the left of the barracks. "Any orders, sir?" asked Smith. Young Jackson had been rather excited. "They'll be over us in five minutes," he said, in a queer, high-pitched voice. His wife was there with the other women. That pretty little wife of his. It was four minutes before the order to fire was given. . . . After that, a noise of screams and a smell of blood, and the tattoo of machine-guns. Of course they hadn't a chance, poor creatures, unless the order to fire had *not* been given. It had been four minutes of agony before the order. He had known, even then, that it was the end of his career, after the Amritsar affair. Dyer had gone down, and he would go down, but India would still be held. The people at home would never understand. They never had understood. . . .

Colonel Fleming was in Burford House again, after this journey in spirit to the place that he saw so often in day-dreams and night-dreams. He saw the tall, ascetic-looking man move away with the lady in black. He saw all these other people about him. "Idealists" they called themselves. Well, he didn't speak their language or have a thought in common with them. And if they knew his name they would insult him. He could not tolerate this position. It was

humiliating and painful beyond words. He must find Sylvia and tell her he was going, or young Neville, and send a message to her. . . .

Sylvia had found a friend of hers. It was Frank Lawton, the artist, whose whimsical eyes lighted up, as usual, at the sight of her. He was one of those who had not put on evening dress, and he made a half-apology.

"When one gets an invitation marked 'Evening-dress optional,' it puts one in a bit of a hole. If one puts on a white tie and the usual thing, it makes one feel a bit of a snob with the others who don't."

"I think they all ought to put it on," said Sylvia. "To do honour to the gilded mirrors."

Frank Lawton did not think it mattered much either way.

"One comes here to exchange ideas," he remarked. "All sorts of interesting people. The people who still give one faith in humanity. Will you let me introduce some of them to you?"

He introduced some literary young men who seemed to see her, and talked instantly about the latest novels by Aldous Huxley and Michael Arlen, and wondered where she had been because she hadn't read them. She put them in their place by talking of French and Italian literature, of which they were uncomfortably ignorant. After that they called quits and talked about things of which they had both heard, including her uncle and aunt, without knowing her relationship.

"Old Burford means well," said one of them, "but he hasn't an idea in his head, unless his wife happens to put it there. She's American, you know. Rather too vivacious, don't you think?"

"Well, I will say she collects a rum crowd," said another young man," introduced as the editor of *The Aesthete*. ""Liberalising the old caste, I suppose. Or introducing them to their future masters."

"There's enough idealism in these rooms to bring about the millennium next Monday, if they could only agree on Sunday evening," said a young gentleman introduced to Sylvia as the Art editor of a weekly paper.

"Do you happen to be one of the idealists?" asked Sylvia, with an air of innocence.

"I believe in the League of Nations and less water in one's beer," he said earnestly, as though reciting a creed.

So Sylvia was amusing herself, rather astonished by her first glimpse of English society in one of its higher spheres. It was not at all as she had imagined it. . . .

Neville Lacey became a little bored with the conversation of the literary young men, especially as they prevented him from talking to Sylvia. He wondered where the Colonel was, and decided that he must have found one of his old friends. He would rather like to overhear their conversation! They would deplore the social revolution in England. Poor old gentlemen! He was sorry for them, in spite of the amusement they gave him. In a way they were more honest than men like Burford and many of the people here, painfully struggling to adapt themselves to the inevitable, making friends with the democracy they feared secretly, and despised in candid moments.

Neville was more of a democrat than some of them who were always professing liberal principles. He knew at least that he was thoroughly dishonest and a hopeless anachronism. In the old days he would have had his place in the country, and a decent revenue to support his position as a decorative young gentleman who would one day help to rule the people. Now he was just a hanger-on in life, getting into debt, and with no prospect ahead. These earnest young men about him would be the rulers of the country. And some of those women with short hair. They were already in training as members of Parliament. They knew far more about the realities of life than he did—down in Bermondsey and London slums, or up in the manufacturing towns. They had studied economics and hard stuff like that. They would probably make a far better job of things than the older crowd. And although he laughed at their idealism and the jargon in which they phrased it, he was bound to admit that all the arguments seemed to be on their side, and all the enthusiasm. Well, as long as they could

stop another war, and get some kind of sense and security in Europe, he wished them the best of luck. If only he could find some way of doing a useful bit of work himself!

Neville Lacey stood twisting his little fair moustache and smiling to himself, with his back to a wall. Sylvia was surrounded, and he couldn't get a word with her. She amused him more than the whole crowd put together. It was her freshness, her gaiety, her quick little wit. But he wouldn't kiss her again, unless he could get some kind of a job and make a home for her and have the right to kiss her. Otherwise it was only playing with fire, and he had burnt his fingers more than once. She was too splendid to play about with—full of youth and life in a tired world, and as pretty as a picture!

Neville Lacey was aware of a youngish, good-looking man, staring at him with shrewd, searching eyes. An American, by the look of him, and wearing the right kind of clothes. He came over and asked a question quietly:

"Major Lacey?"

Neville gave him a quick glance, and liked the cut of his white waistcoat.

"Yes, my name's Lacey, worse luck. I've dropped the 'Major' part of it in this rather foolish peace."

It was clear that he did not remember the man who spoke to him, and who now smiled and gave him a reminder.

"I wasn't sure of you at first, until I tried to visualise you in a tin hat! Do you remember one night, outside Amiens, after the German drive in March of '18, an American officer in a ditch, with a shell-splinter in his leg? You picked him up and gave him a lift to the Hôtel du Rhin."

"Not my car," said Neville. "It was the General's. The old man had the wind up properly, and thought Fritz would get through to the coast. Well, he nearly did, but for God and some tired Tommies. A nasty night, that!"

"Then you remember me?" asked the American.

Neville glanced at him again.

"Well, things get a bit blurred after a lapse of time."

"I rather hoped you'd remember," said the American, "because I've always been grateful for that lift. It happened

to save my life—which seemed important to me at the time."

Neville liked his way of putting it.

"Glad I happened to be useful for once. Seems a long time ago, all that! We had an idea we were serving some great purpose. I confess I'm one of those who still think we were. Now it's all rather confusing, and the purpose has gone out of things."

The American glanced round the room, and smiled.

"There seems a lot of purpose here! The progress of humanity. Universal peace. League of Nations. Well, I'm in favour of all that. But I wish your democracy didn't make such a habit of striking all the time. I couldn't get my luggage off the *Aquitania*, and the train was five hours late. It doesn't make for efficiency."

"It's our idea of liberty," said Neville lightly. "What you might call the throes of Labour struggling towards the millennium. Not being a working-man myself, I find it a nuisance, but I can see the other point of view."

"I confess I can't," said the American. "But then I'm an employer of labour and prejudiced."

Neville had an idea of asking him for a job, but decided against it. He also decided that a political discussion would be rather tiring. He wanted to talk to Sylvia again.

"Let me introduce you to the prettiest girl in the room," he suggested.

The American seemed to like the idea, but said he thought he knew her already.

"Hardly likely!" said Neville. "This is her first night in the great gay world. And, by the by, you might let me know your name. It's so difficult to remember all the lives one saved in the Great War, don't you find?"

"Hillier," said the American. "Edward P. Hillier, of Grand Rapids, U.S.A."

Neville seemed to remember the name vaguely. Grand Rapids—and something to do with furniture. Was it Sylvia who had mentioned it one day? He steered his way through the crowd, followed closely by the American, and touched her arm, as she was talking to the group of literary men, who seemed to like her conversation.

"Sorry for barging in," said Neville, "but I want to introduce Mr. Hillier of Grand Rapids. He's going to tell you what a little hero I was in the Great War."

Sylvia turned with a cry of surprise and pleasure. A wave of colour swept into her face as she held out her hand to the American.

"A miracle!" she said. "I had a letter from you this morning, dated New York."

The American bowed over her hand rather charmingly.

"I came by the same boat. I decided not to wait till the Fall. It's supposed to be business, but it's really pleasure. And I'm in luck to-night. I had no idea I should find you here. Peggy Burford is my cousin."

"And Lord Burford is my uncle," said Sylvia. "If that isn't the funniest thing in the world!"

"Quite the pleasantest," said the American. "We're sort of relatives, but not too close to be—objectionable."

"Why didn't you tell me at Monte Carlo?" asked Sylvia.

"Well, you see, I'm only a poor relation of your British aristocracy. I didn't want to buck."

Neville intervened with a remark which he spoke amiably.

"You two seem to know each other almost too well. I feel an outsider. I'm almost inclined to regret my heroism in the Great War."

"He saved my life," said Edward Hillier.

"That's what I meant," said Neville, graciously.

Sylvia's laughter rang out happily. She thought it all very thrilling. But she was aware of some distress in Neville's eyes, and saw behind his smiling mask. He was jealous of Edward Hillier, whom she was so pleased to see again! He was so jealous, indeed, that presently he walked away, and she did not see him again until he strolled up an hour later and said, "The Colonel is aching to go. Can you drag yourself away?"

"With difficulty," she answered, and gave her hand to the American again.

"Then I'm to come to tea to-morrow," said the American. "That's fine!"

XXII

SYLVIA liked being loved, as she had remarked more than once in her life to Stephen, when he had charged her with being a heartless flirt, with no more moral sense than Cleopatra or Marguérite de Valois. That, of course, was utterly absurd, as Stephen well knew. Several nice boys, two or three ridiculous old men, and little Count Goldoni had made love to her in different ways—some shy, some bold—during her life abroad in the wandering days, and she had been very much amused with them and had teased them light-heartedly, pleased that they should think her beautiful in spite of her uncertain nose. But in England things were getting serious. For one thing, she was no longer a schoolgirl, but a grown-up young woman with certain responsibilities which she could not escape on a plea of youth and ignorance. She was old enough for men to lose their hearts to her really and truly, and it wasn't fair to play about with them, pretending that it was just a nursery game, or a drawing-room diversion.

She supposed it was her rather advanced sense of humour and that dangerous habit of liking to be loved which had brought things to something resembling a crisis. She could not ignore the fact that Mr. Edward P. Hillier of Grand Rapids had come to England with the very special purpose of renewing his offer, made rather abruptly one night in Monte Carlo. He did not let her ignore it, but was adopting American methods of hustle and efficiency. Flowers of a most expensive kind began to arrive by special messenger at the small house in Montpelier Square, addressed "With Compliments to Miss Fleming," written on his visiting-card, as though she had just recovered from a serious illness.

She had read in *The Saturday Evening Post,* which she had bought sometimes on the Paris kiosks, that the Americans liked to "say it with flowers" when they were feeling romantic. Edward Hillier was saying an awful lot, with

great profit to the Court florist in Piccadilly. He did not say very much to her directly when he came to tea several times, or when she met him at dinner at Burford House, to which she was invited frequently by "Aunt Peggy," as Lady Burford desired to be called, or again at the opera, evening receptions, and afternoon dances to which she went with that American aunt who seemed to have taken a fancy to her and was giving her a very good time. He was shy, courteous, charming, and treated her with a kind of respectful and tender homage which she found extremely pleasant, though slightly embarrassing.

Once or twice he hinted that he ought to get back to the United States because of his work, but wanted to fix up something of "particular importance" before he booked his return passage. Once he asked her whether she was still so terribly European that she regarded the United States as being beyond the pale of civilisation. Several times he described life in Grand Rapids and gave a rather glowing picture of the people there and their wonderful kindness.

"You'd be surprised," he said, "how kind they are, and how keen on the things that matter—art, literature, international politics, and all that. The Women's Clubs are very strong on the League of Nations. Then there's the Country Club . . ."

It seemed that the Country Club was remarkably like an English country house, only better heated, and rather more luxurious. There was an excellent golf-course, and the tennis-courts were as good as those at Monte Carlo. The young married people were a set by themselves and all very friendly. Plenty of dances and good fun. Not at all dull.

He wondered why she laughed in the middle of this advertisement of Grand Rapids and its attractions. But she was quite aware that it was not altogether a laughing matter. This young man had come several thousand miles to ask her a certain question. He was only giving her time before he decided to ask it. And it obviously meant a good deal to him, as she could see by his anxiety, and by his serious efforts to be lighthearted and gay when he wanted to be sentimental and romantic. She steered him away from

sentiment, and was blunt and downright, almost brutally so, when he began to talk in a romantic strain. She was artful, too, in avoiding any opportunity of being left too long alone with him, though Aunt Peggy was certainly in collusion, and playing the part of matchmaker, by singing his virtues on all occasions.

"That cousin of mine is a real man," she said once. "I'm proud of him. He did well in the war, and he's doing well after the war, which can't be said of some young men I know. One day he'll be one of our leading citizens. I don't mean because of the dollars—though that furniture business is a big thing—but because of his character and quality of mind. He thinks. He has seen life. He has an open mind and a good brain—best of all, a big heart. Men like that become leaders. We could do with more of them in England."

"The English boys are all right," said Sylvia, with newfound loyalty. "There's nothing wrong with them."

Lady Burford was not quite sure of that. The younger crowd in England did not seem to realise its responsibilities. They took nothing seriously, except sport, and even there they were being beaten by their American cousins. "Look at that boy Neville," she said.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Sylvia, blushing a little.

"A philanderer!" said Lady Burford. "He won't even speak for me on Prohibition. He ridicules my husband's idealism. He won't come to any of my drawing-room meetings or take the slightest interest in liberal ideas."

"He helped to save England," said Sylvia. "He was wounded three times, and nearly went blind. I think he has been a real hero."

She spoke rather more hotly than she had intended, and was annoyed with herself for the thrill in her voice.

Lady Burford looked at her shrewdly.

"If I were you I wouldn't see too much of him. He can't afford to marry—his father is an absolute rotter, always up to some shady business or other, so Johnny tells me—and there's no backbone behind that beauty of his.

What's he doing for little old England—now, when the war is over?"

"What's England doing for him?" asked Sylvia. "After all his service and sacrifice?"

Lady Burford was of opinion that if Neville Lacey took his coat off and got down to some honest work, England would reward him in the usual way, according to his market value.

"I'm loyal to England," she said; "I love its funny old ways and its friendly folk, but I'm still sufficiently American to hate slackers, and there are far too many of them in this tight little island. They're all whining about the past. Why can't they get busy with the future?"

She spoke a word or two about Sylvia's family affairs.

"That Die-Hard father of yours must have a hard struggle to keep up that old house of his! It's up to you to marry a man who can afford to keep you decently and help the family pot, my dear."

"You mean to say I ought to marry for money, Aunt?" asked Sylvia, scandalised.

Lady Burford laughed, and raised her hands, rather pretty, vivacious little hands.

"Heaven forbid! People say that Johnny married me for money. As a matter of fact he worships the ground I tread on. But all the same my dollars are mighty useful to him. They saved this house from falling into ruin or being turned into a museum, with cheap days on Thursdays and a shilling catalogue. I'm all for the marriage of American girls with English husbands and English girls with American husbands. Link up the English-speaking race and the world is safe for liberty and justice! Also England can do with some of our ill-gotten gold."

"I shan't marry to save England," said Sylvia very decidedly. "I shall marry to please myself."

"Selfish!" cried Lady Burford, but she patted Sylvia's hand and laughed in a friendly way. "Choose the right man, anyway," she added.

"In any case," said Sylvia, "the question doesn't arrive,

as they say in the newspapers. I'm not in any hurry to marry. I'm in love with life."

Lady Burford answered her rather prettily.

"Life is in love with you, and I don't blame it!"

"The question doesn't arrive," Sylvia had said. Yet that was hardly true. It was arriving from several directions at the same time.

One of them from a rather ridiculous direction. It was from that young man Sidney Swinton—"the Boy from Battersea," as Neville called him.

She had gone out of her way to be kind to him after that scene in the studio. She did not like him to think that she looked down on him because of her "grand relations" and "fine friends," as he called them. Besides, she was touched by his boyish adoration, by his delight in playing to her songs, and by his absurd melancholy if she kept away from the studio for more than a few days. For Stephen's sake also she wanted to be kind to this young artist, who was his best friend in London. It was to please Stephen more than anything else that she accepted invitations to tea with Sidney Swinton's people on the south side of Clapham Common, and joined them—and Sidney—in parties to a theatre called the Old Vic, somewhere down in the slums, where highbrow plays were performed to a mixed audience of intellectual young men and women from city offices and social clubs and a working-class crowd of navvies, costers and factory-girls from the mean streets of South London.

"This is the real thing," said Stephen, who was fast becoming a democrat with advanced ideas. "All this means much more than your stuck-up parties at Burford House, and Neville Lacey's butterfly friends. This is democracy on its way to liberty and the new world."

Sylvia, sitting next to Sidney Swinton in the stalls of the Old Vic, rather wished that democracy on its way to liberty wouldn't suck oranges in the gallery and spit the pips over the front rail. But she was glad to see that side of English life and she was not at all "stuck-up," as Stephen called it, with the Swinton family, who behaved to her

rather as though she were a princess who had stepped off her throne to visit them.

Sidney's father, the Labour member, had not done badly out of politics, it seemed. He lived in a large house on the south side of Clapham Common, cheaply furnished—"on the hire system," as he told Sylvia, but quite comfortable. He had a wonderful library of old books which he had picked up as bargains on book-stalls in the Farringdon Road and other strange places unknown to Sylvia, and he seemed to specialise on the literature of the French Revolution, but was also a great reader of history of other periods and countries. A tall, burly man with a florid skin and blue eyes, and hands still rough with his toil as a mechanic in early days—though he hadn't done a stroke of manual work for twenty years, as he candidly admitted—he had a great gift of speech in a strong Cockney accent, and a flamboyant imagination.

He called his wife "Ma"—she was a nice, motherly soul devoted to her six children—addressed Sylvia instantly as "my dear," and prophesied the glorious day when Labour would be in power and the whole of Europe would be linked up in brotherly love between the great democracies.

"Mind you, my dear," he said to Sylvia, one night, "I'm not one of those wild men who want to pull everything down and then sit on the top of the ruins singing 'I'm King of the Castle, get down, you dirty rascal!' I've more sense in my head than that, having read a bit of history. I'm an evolutionist, with a queer old sentiment for the King and the Royal Family who have done their job well, poor dears, and a feeling for the old romance of English life. I've no more use for Bolshevism than I have for devil-worship. It killed any lurking sympathy I had by that murder business—exaggerated, no doubt, in the world's Press, but undeniably bloody. But I'm out for the working-classes and the lower middle-classes, and the unemployed, and the down-and-outs, and the kids in the slums. I want them to have decent house-room, good grub in their bellies, more education, a better chance of sharing the beauty of life, less of those nagging cares which come from insecurity of labour and the

fear of ill-health and old age. You may call that revolutionary. Well, I call it Christianity. If we can't give our people those things, there's something wrong with society. It's my job to see that they get those things, and by God, my dear, I'm going to do my best as a member of Parliament—perhaps one day as a Cabinet Minister. I daresay you think I'm out for my own interests, a selfish, brutal, ill-educated fellow, full of greed and grab? Well, you ask Ma over there! She'll tell you that I'm a simple soul not entirely devoid of the milk of human kindness, and finding my greatest pleasure in dull old books. Or ask Polly there. She knows, don't you, Polly?"

Polly was a parrot who seemed to have a great devotion for the Labour leader, especially when he tickled its neck. Polly answered this invitation to talk by raising its plume and screeching out "Vote for Bill!"

"That's me," said Mr. Swinton. "Bill Swinton; and Polly's my best election agent."

Mr. Swinton was very proud of his artist son.

"That boy of mine," he said to Sylvia, "is a real genius. Those cartoons of his are doing a lot to educate England. I used to think Art was rather waste of time, but Sidney has taught me better. Art is action. Action is Art, or ought to be—subject to the laws of form and beauty, I mean. I feel proud that I'm the father of a boy like that, an artist and a gentleman—educated at Ruskin Hall, Oxford—and as good as gold all through. Some of his ideas are in advance of mine, rather visionary and unpractical, but that's youth. I like to see them start wild. Afterwards life tames 'em down. . . . And I'm prejudiced in your favour, my dear, apart from your pretty face, because Sidney thinks the world of you and says you haven't a grain of snobbishness. Well, we're proud to welcome you in our little home. We want you to come often and stay long. In this house there's no caste, but the spirit of liberty and love."

There was certainly a jolly family of boys and girls, mostly younger than Sidney, and all devoted to Sylvia after their first shyness had worn off. Sidney's eldest sister,

Nancy was rather a beauty, with a mass of copper-coloured hair and a face like one of Rossetti's portraits. Stephen was much taken with her, and it was obvious that she regarded Stephen with considerable interest and admiration. They discussed Art together, and she seemed to know something about it, having attended a series of lectures on the history of Art at the London University, where she had matriculated with honours. Sylvia found her rather alarming at first because of her slight hostility of manner, but afterwards they became good friends, and it was from Nancy that Sylvia discovered how much she was loved by Sidney Swinton.

"My brother is balmy on you," said Miss Swinton one afternoon between the Acts of "Much Ado About Nothing" when they sat alone while Stephen and Sidney had gone out to smoke.

"What does 'balmy' mean exactly?" asked Sylvia.

"Well, it means just that," said Nancy. "He's gone off the deep end about you. He thinks you're like Dante's Beatrice, and he dreams about you, raves about you, and broods about you. He comes down to breakfast looking hopeless if he hasn't seen you for a day or two, and takes long and savage walks to the uttermost parts of London like a tortured soul. He refuses to be cheered up even when Father prophesies the coming of a Labour Government."

"Well, that wouldn't seem very cheering to some friends of mine," said Sylvia. "But what am I going to do about it? Surely you exaggerate?"

"Not a bit," answered Miss Swinton cheerfully. "In my opinion he'll probably take to drink or do some dark and desperate deed unless you yield to his hopeless passion. . . . And, by the by, I suppose it is hopeless?"

She asked the question with a quick, smiling glance at Sylvia's face.

"I want to be kind to him," said Sylvia, "and I like him very much, but I don't see how I can let it go farther than that. Do you?"

Miss Nancy Swinton considered the matter.

"Sidney is a nice boy," she said, after a pause, "and he doesn't drop his aitches, like Father, though he has the same

coloured hair as myself. He's an affectionate son, not a bad brother, and would certainly make a good husband, from a moral point of view. But, until the social revolution is accomplished, I really don't see how you, with all your grand relations, could marry an impecunious artist, with a noisy family in South London and a parrot in the house. It's asking too much of you. I quite see that."

"Oh, bother all that!" said Sylvia. "If I fell in love with any one I should marry him, if he had a family of chimney-sweeps."

"Well, I don't know," remarked Nancy thoughtfully. "They would be an awful nuisance. But apart from that, I take it that Sidney hasn't much chance of inspiring you with amorous passion?"

"I hardly think so," said Sylvia cautiously. "I haven't felt any premonitions. But of course one never knows."

Nancy Swinton laughed at her. "Oh, you'd know all right! Anyhow I'll tell young Sidney not to make an ass of himself."

"Thanks," said Sylvia gratefully. "If you could put in a quiet word . . ."

But that afternoon, after the theatre, she had rather a scene with the boy himself. They travelled back to Chelsea on the top of an omnibus. Stephen and Nancy had gone inside, as there were no more seats on top. It was a strange place for a love-affair, yet Sidney chose it for a passionate declaration. It was when it began to rain, and they sat together under the same umbrella, isolated from all the world under that dome of dripping silk.

For a moment or two Sylvia chatted about the play, but the boy listened moodily.

Presently he spoke in a low voice.

"This is the first time we've been alone together for weeks."

Sylvia raised her umbrella a little, and perceived that the rain was dripping off the spokes down the neck of a clergyman on the seat in front.

"I should hardly call this being alone," she remarked.

"It's the best I can get," said Sidney. "What with that

confounded family of mine swarming around, and Frank Lawton's banjo accompaniment in the studio, and all the rest of it, I never get a chance of talking to you privately."

"Is there anything particular you want to say?" asked Sylvia. She really didn't think he could be quite so absurd as to say anything *very* particular on the top of an omnibus in the rain. But that was where she was mistaken. Love defies the most unpropitious conditions.

"Yes," said Sidney Swinton, beginning to stutter slightly. "I want to tell you th-that I love you most f-f-frightfully. I can't work for thinking of you. The whole world's different since I met you."

"Better—or worse?" asked Sylvia, feeling extremely embarrassed but trying to give a lighter tone to the conversation.

"You light things up for me when I'm with you, and it all goes black when I think what a fool I am."

"You shouldn't think so," said Sylvia reassuringly. "Why should you?"

"Because I haven't a dog's chance of making you like me a little," he said miserably. "Your kindness is only condescension. I can see how amused you are with my father and the family! You're like a princess coming to see how the poor live in their model dwellings. Very gracious, but of different clay."

"That's unfair!" cried Sylvia. "I don't feel that way at all. I'm afraid you have a morbid imagination."

That remark seemed to shake him a little. He confessed that his sister Nancy accused him of the same disease.

"It's this extraordinary thing called love!" he said. "I used to think it was all humbug. Now I know what it is."

"What is it?" asked Sylvia. "I want to know."

She tried to keep the humour out of her voice and to control an almost irresistible desire to laugh, because of that poor clergyman getting all the rain from the spokes of her umbrella, and because of this love-scene on the top of an omnibus.

Sidney Swinton was aware of her struggle with mirth.

"It's hell!" he said. "No doubt it seems a laughing matter

to you. . . . To me it means everything in life. More than Socialism, more than Art——"

He might have been more eloquent, but the clergyman in front interrupted the conversation by turning round in his seat and addressing him with a sudden ferocity.

"Can't you keep that umbrella straight? My neck isn't a public gutter!"

"My fault," said Sylvia generously.

She was grateful for the interruption, which reduced this boy-lover of hers to a melancholy and abashed silence. But she squeezed his hand when he left her with Stephen, on his way home to Clapham Common, as a sign that she appreciated his affection and desired to be kind.

XXIII

MRS. FLEMING had reached another crisis in her life, and felt that this time her sense of humour was of no avail. In that game of life which she had played with an adventurous spirit, taking great hazards, she had lost again. Once again the God of Luck had let her down with a dreadful bump, and she was utterly dispirited.

She had come to England so happily after that fright in Monte Carlo. Everything seemed to have been straightened out now that her husband had paid her debts, given up his claim to the children, and set her up in a new life, and in the London she loved. It had been splendid meeting her old friends again after the first shock of finding them—old. That shop in Bond Street had promised great things under the spell of her brother's enthusiasm, and she had been glad of the happiness of Sylvia and Stephen, after their first dislike of dirty old London. But gradually all this superficial appearance of a pleasant and placid existence had begun to crumble. The business in Bond Street was a hopeless and disastrous failure—how bad she did not know until her brother shocked her by the truth. And that knowledge of failure came at a time when she knew that other things had failed—her own scheme of life, everything for which she had striven and suffered, even her mother-love. She had lost Sylvia already and she was losing Stephen, and she was a lonely, miserable woman at an age when life ought to have been joyous and contented.

Sometimes she was afraid that she was a wicked, selfish, jealous woman, and that thought frightened her more than anything, though she had other reasons for fear, because she had always believed that in spite of her weakness she was good and generous at heart. But it was the loss of Sylvia that made her feel at the mercy of mean thoughts. Could it be possible that she was jealous of her own beautiful daughter, and that she begrudged Sylvia the gaiety and good fun

that were hers by right of youth and birth? No, that was ridiculous, and yet she felt hurt and miserable every time Sylvia went round to Burford House, every time she went out to dances with Lady Burford or Neville Lacey or any of her new friends, every time she went down to Oakwood Court for a week-end with her father and those two old frumps, Aunt Elizabeth and Aunt Anne, who had fallen in love with her.

Sylvia had drifted away into a new life from which her own mother was barred. In spite of her protestations of loyalty, her sudden embraces, and all the little endearments with which she tried to make amends, she was always flitting away to her father's side of the family and using the house in Montpelier Square merely as a place for bed and breakfast. Her father was always giving her presents of new frocks and little trinkets, Lady Burford—that American woman—was constantly making other gifts, and Sylvia was losing her head a little, she thought, at all this attention from her rich relations and their titled friends.

Then there was that young American, Mr. Hillier. The house was positively infested with his flowers. It was becoming ridiculous. He called three or four times a week, always very polite to Mrs. Fleming, always charming and courteous, but with no eyes for any one but Sylvia and without disguise as to the object of his visits. And Sylvia was getting fond of him. She could see that by her excitement when he came, by her sudden flushes of colour, by a strange new light in the girl's eyes, by moments of dreaminess and introspection from which she suddenly emerged with little gusts of laughter or outbursts of song. Mrs. Fleming was panic-stricken at the thought that he would carry Sylvia off to the uttermost ends of the earth. That would be worse than these constant excursions into a gay world where her mother could not join her. That would be losing her for ever.

Mrs. Fleming cried at night when that thought came to her, and when sometimes she lay awake waiting for the sound of the taxi which would bring back Sylvia from some dance or reception. *She* had been as gay as that, twenty-five

years ago. Burford House had been open to her then. People had sent flowers to her. She had had a crowd of lovers about her. She had never been too tired to dance. She had come back like that, not in a taxi-cab, but in one of the old hansoms with its clip-clop of hoofs through the London squares. Now, though she felt so young, she was a lonely and deserted woman, barred from the society of her husband's people, and jealous of her own daughter. That was terrible. She wouldn't be jealous. She would fight against that mean and miserable emotion, so utterly unfair to Sylvia, so inconceivable after all their jolly comradeship. It was only because Sylvia's adventures made her feel so old, so much on the shelf.

Forty-seven—an old woman! How she had wasted her life! How futile it had all been! How much she had missed! It was all the fault of that husband of hers with his stern code and unforgiving character. Even now, under pretence of being generous, he was stealing Sylvia away. He had captured her by his air of chivalry and his old man's tenderness. She hated him again. She had a good mind to write him a savage letter, accusing him of having broken his word, and forbidding Sylvia to visit him again. Soon she would have to tell him, through Sylvia, how much money had been lost, and it would be a frightful shock to him. She hadn't the courage to tell Sylvia or Stephen. It was rather like that affair at Monte Carlo all over again, only this time it wasn't her fault.

Stephen would stand by her. That was one comfort. He hadn't been captured by his father's side of the family. He was even too stand-offish, poor boy. But even he had been going out more often than she liked. It was that ridiculous family of Socialists at Clapham. They fascinated him, and he was smitten with the girl with the copper-coloured hair whom he had brought over to tea one day. She made a hero of him, and the boy could not resist the temptation of spending his evenings with her family. He was always pleading with his mother to go with him, and once she had been, and found it ridiculous and uncomfortable. She could not understand how Stephen could be interested in such a

lot of very common people, and she had been rash enough to tell him so, upon which he had flamed out that people like that were the salt of the earth. Quite likely, but, as she said, she didn't care for the salt of the earth. She preferred humanity with the sugar-coating of social refinement. They had quarrelled a little, almost for the first time, and Stephen had asked her with sarcasm whether she would prefer him to "get thick" with his father's crowd. Then he had repented and stayed home for three nights running, until he was lured to that low-class theatre, the Old Vic, to see "The Merchant of Venice," with Nancy Swinton.

It was on that evening, when she sat alone, staring out of the window of Montpelier Square and feeling very miserable because of this new loneliness—Sylvia was away at Oakwood again—that her brother Jack came home early from the club which he had joined at her expense. Not that she would have begrudged him that if he had behaved decently and with gratitude. But he was always quarrelling with her now, and had been drinking heavily for the last week or two. She heard him arrive in a taxi-cab as usual and then open the front door with his latch-key. Rather more quietly than usual he went upstairs, and she heard him moving about his room and opening and shutting drawers as though packing up. That was queer, she thought, and she went to the bottom of the stairs and called to him.

"Is that you, Jack? What are you doing?"

He was silent for a moment. Then he answered, rather more amiably than of late, "It's all right. I'll be down in a few minutes."

He came down twenty minutes later, carrying two Gladstone bags, which seemed heavy as he dumped them down in the hall.

"What are they for?" asked Mrs. Fleming. "Are you going away for the week-end? You might have let me know before."

Uncle Jack, as her children called him, laughed rather nervously as he went past her into the drawing-room to fetch his pipe from the mantel-piece.

"For more than a week-end, old girl," he said huskily.

"'It may be for years, and it may be for ever,' as the old song puts it."

He glanced round the room with a kind of humorous regret.

"Well, I'm sorry to leave this place. I shall remember it pleasantly, in less luxurious surroundings. And I must say you've been very kind to me, Helen. I'm not ungrateful, believe me."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Fleming. "What about business and everything? You can't go away at a moment's notice like that!"

He looked at her sideways, as though afraid to meet her eyes squarely. Then he laughed uneasily.

"To tell you the truth, old girl, it's got to be done at a moment's notice, or not at all, perhaps. I'm catching the boat-train to Ostend. After that, if there's no trouble, I shall get out to America again. I wasn't meant for city life, and I'm a fool at finance. Too many crooks about. That little company of mine has got into a mess. An unholy mess. I'm skipping before the law gets to work. I don't think they would bother about me. It's that scoundrel Beresford. And Lord Lacey—that poor chuckleheaded fool! But I'm not risking it. I prefer a free life in the open fields. Damn civilisation and all its iniquities!"

"Jack," said Mrs. Fleming, with a sharp note of anxiety in her voice, "what about my business? The accounts and all that?"

Her brother looked at the clock, and then filled his pipe with one hand and lit it, as though he had a few minutes to spare.

"You'd better wind up that business," he said. "It's quite hopeless. You ought never to have started it—against my strong advice."

Mrs. Fleming cried out at him, angrily: "It was your idea! How can you say that?"

"Oh, Lord, no! I was all for emigration. The open spaces of the world."

"Jack," said Mrs. Fleming sharply, "don't waste time in talking that rubbish. What is the state of that business?

How much money have we lost? Tell me the truth, for God's sake!"

Jack Rivington answered sullenly:

"You'll find out the truth, if you can make head or tail of those damned accounts. I should say that, all told, that husband of yours will have to pay up about ten thousand pounds. It might be a bit more, but not much."

Mrs. Fleming felt herself become white and cold. She repeated the figures he had given her in a faint voice, and swayed a little as she stood before her brother.

"It's incredible! All that money lost on a shop in Bond Street!"

"Why not?" asked Uncle Jack. "Publicity costs a hell of a lot of money. Then there are the orders from the wholesale firms."

"Yes, but I wrote you a cheque for all those. Out of that money Dick paid into my account."

Uncle Jack's face flushed a little.

"I may as well tell you the horrid truth," he said. "It's bound to come out, and I hate lies anyhow—when they're unnecessary. I used that cheque for that little company of mine. I thought it was going to be a gold mine. That scoundrel Beresford and that poor boob Lacey——"

"But, Jack," said Mrs. Fleming, "it was my husband's money. It was stealing to take it like that!"

Uncle Jack shrugged his shoulders.

"In the eyes of the law," he answered contemptuously. "Not between relations, if they've any sporting instinct. I'll admit it was a gamble. If it had come off I should have paid it back with handsome interest. Well, it didn't come off, and that's that."

He glanced at the clock again, and said, "I must be going. I can just about do it in a taxi."

He hesitated for a moment, and then blurted out a question.

"Have you any spare cash about you? I shall need it, badly."

Mrs. Fleming burst into tears and put her handkerchief up to her eyes. She did not see her brother go to her desk

and take a wad of ten-shilling notes from her purse. He came over and stood by her side for a moment, and then put his hand on her shoulder and kissed her neck.

"Sorry, old girl. Very rotten and all that. But it won't hurt that husband of yours. Give my love to the kids. I'm sorry to miss them, without saying good-bye."

She did not answer, but wept, with her head down.

"Well, so long!" said Uncle Jack.

He went out into the hall and opened the door. She heard him whistling for a taxi, then dragging his heavy bags out, before slamming the door.

XXIV

WHEN the door had shut upon her brother for the last time, Mrs. Fleming was panic-stricken. The thought of all that money lost over the shop and that cheque stolen from her husband—yes, stolen was the only word—annihilated her pride and spirit. She felt stunned and beaten. What a fool she had been! What a tragic fool to give Jack a free hand with the business, keeping no check on his accounts, never asking him to show her the books, and taking his honesty for granted. She might have known! He had always been reckless, irresponsible, and utterly selfish. Never once in all those adventures of his had he done any good to himself or to any one else. He had been in some trouble once in South Africa—she remembered now—and in the old days he had sponged on her for money. It was because he had amused her so much that she had been glad to see him again and had believed in his wild optimism and pose of good-nature. He was a scoundrel, masked under a hearty manner and that pretence of being a rough, simple soul—a child of nature!

How could she face up to this thing with her husband? How could she dare to let him know? He had been generous —over money matters at least—and now she had let him down, horribly. It would be a heavy blow to him, she knew that. Ten thousand pounds—incredible and frightful! It was a terrible sum of money to lose, for an Indian Colonel with a small capital and poor relations. He had to keep those women, Elizabeth and Anne. They would be furious with her again, and hate her more than they did already. It might ruin poor old Dick. For the second time in her life she had let him down, and yet she was perfectly innocent this time. Absolutely straight. She had done her level best to make the business a success and spare him expense. God had a grudge against her. Perhaps it was because she had given up her old faith. She wasn't meant to be happy like

other women, in spite of her gift for happiness and natural gaiety. Just when she was feeling contented and safe, the ground had slipped beneath her feet again, and she had no security. She was a lonely woman, when she hated loneliness; a devoted mother robbed of her children; a woman eager for the fun and joy of life, but getting nothing but hard knocks and wretchedness.

Sylvia was away again for the week-end. Stephen was over at Clapham with his Socialists. Whom could she turn to for advice and help? She decided to go to Henry Carey. He was always faithful and true and helpful. And he ought to know. He had put three hundred pounds into that business of hers. Well, he would never see a penny of it again, and he could ill afford to lose it. That brother of hers had milked her relatives and friends for his fraudulent schemes. Lord Lacey was in it too, he said. Neville Lacey's father, who had always been as reckless as Jack, though a shade more honest. He had been in love with her in the old days. And now he had been borrowing money from her husband. Poor old Dick, whom they called so hard! Well, they were taking it out of him now all right!

She went round to Henry Carey's lodgings for the first time, and was surprised to find him living in such a squalid place, when the taxi stopped in the middle of a small street —Cassidy Road—at the far end of the Fulham Road. Some dirty children were playing on the doorsteps, and a slatternly maid in a greasy apron and her hair in curl-papers opened the door of Number 48 in answer to her knock. Yes, Mr. Carey was in. Would she step inside, and mind the pail.

She found Henry Carey in a bed-sitting-room, poorly furnished except for a few pieces of Chippendale and some old prints on the walls.

"My dear Helen!" he exclaimed. "What a pleasant surprise to see you here!"

He kissed her hand in his old-fashioned, courteous way, and laughed nervously as she glanced round the room, unable to keep the pity from her eyes.

"It's not a grand place," he admitted. "Not so splendid as the Albany, where I used to give you tea in the old days!

Well, beggars can't be choosers, and it's quite comfortable, especially as I spend most of the day at the club among old comrades who don't enquire about my private way of life. Some of them would be surprised to find me here. Those old major-generals who complain of poverty but still manage to do pretty well with a few thousand acres and a town house. . . . But do sit down, my dear. How's the shop going? And that little nest-egg of mine?"

Mrs. Fleming did not sit down. She raised her hands with a tragic gesture, and said, "Henry, I've something frightful to tell you. That little nest-egg of yours is all gone, and thousands more besides. Jack has gambled it away and behaved like a thief. I'm afraid it's worse even than I know."

Henry Carey's monocle dropped from his eye and he turned pale. But he showed admirable self-control.

"That's bad news, Helen," he said quietly. "I'm very sorry to hear that. But won't you sit down? Please!"

He showed more courage than she knew then. That little "nest-egg" of his was rather important to him. Unless he could get back that three hundred pounds he would have to cancel his subscription at the club, his last link with the old life of gentility and comfort, the one place where he could meet his old comrades and forget the squalor of these lodgings in the Fulham Road. He had been going to ask Helen about it. This news was certainly a blow. But he wouldn't let her know, now that she was in such trouble herself. Very grave trouble, as it seemed when she told him what had happened.

"Lord Lacey is in it too," she said. "He and Jack have been as thick as thieves lately, and I think he has been borrowing money from Dick, or inducing him to invest it in that bogus concern, whatever it was."

"It was oil," said Henry Carey. "Your brother spoke to me about it several times. I was rather tempted, I confess, Your brother had a knack of inspiring confidence in what, I'm afraid, were fairy-tales."

"Not fairy-tales," said Mrs. Fleming. "Lies, Henry. Sheer, deliberate lies!"

Later she showed great distress and embarrassed him exceedingly.

"Henry, what am I to do? How can I tell Stephen and Sylvia that I've lost all their father's money?"

He patted her on the hand, and tried to see the bright side of things.

"Don't let us exaggerate. We mustn't lose our heads over this affair. Your husband has rich relatives who won't let him down. The Burfords, for instance. . . . Then, again, we must establish the facts. We don't know them. It's quite possible that your brother spoke wildly. Things may not be nearly so bad as you imagine. Personally, I don't think you could have lost ten thousand pounds over that establishment in Bond Street. It's hardly credible."

"The shop is only one thing," said Mrs. Fleming miserably. "That oil company is another. And Jack was in both of them—with my husband's money."

She told him about the cheque, and Henry Carey considered the matter gravely.

"It looks unpleasant, I admit. But let's know the whole truth before we get into a panic."

It was at his suggestion that they went to call on Neville Lacey. He might find out from his father exactly what had happened about the oil business. Then it would be their duty to tell the Colonel. There might be time to save the situation, or at least to save something out of the wreckage. They might approach the Burfords and get their help in some way. It was difficult to suggest anything definite, said Henry Carey, because he was a child in all financial matters, as he knew to his cost. It was not the first time he had been let down by the over-optimism of persuasive friends—hence these lodgings off the Fulham Road.

Mrs. Fleming grasped at these slender hopes he gave her like a drowning woman who clutches at a floating spar. She would go to any length of humiliation if she could only avoid the confession that her brother Jack had robbed the Colonel of that frightful sum of money, owing to her folly and carelessness. He would think that she was in the

swindle. Even Sylvia and Stephen might imagine that she had played fast and loose with their father's capital.

"They will think nothing of the sort," said Henry Carey. "If I know anything of them, they'll be loyal to the best mother in the world."

"A foolish, reckless, unlucky mother!" cried Mrs. Fleming, in the depths of self-reproach and self-pity.

But Henry Carey's loyalty comforted her a little. If she committed a murder he would find excuses for her, she believed.

They took an omnibus to Hyde Park Corner and walked through Belgrave Square to Neville's flat in Lyall Street, and when the door was opened by a man-servant she heard Neville's voice speaking loudly and harshly:

"Father, you must have known that the whole thing was a damned fraud!"

A good-natured voice answered him.

"Not at all, my dear boy. I had the highest confidence in Beresford and Jack Rivington. How could I know they were a pair of scoundrels?"

"You had no right to persuade the Colonel to take all those shares. A bogus company! A ramp of the worst kind!"

"What name, madam?" asked the man-servant.

The voices stopped when he went into the room, and a moment later Neville came out into the hall, looking worried. When he took Mrs. Fleming's hand, he spoke anxiously.

"I'm so glad you've come, but it's rather a sad business, I'm afraid. I'm having a colossal row with my father."

He insisted on Henry Carey coming in too, and said his advice might be useful. At least he might be able to pour water on the troubled oil.

Lord Lacey was standing with his back to the fire-place, smoking a cigar, which he pitched into the fire when Mrs. Fleming came in. He was in evening clothes, and looked very handsome in his florid style, but rather flushed and uneasy.

He laughed nervously when he raised Mrs. Fleming's hand to his lips for a moment.

"I'm afraid you're worried, Helen. That brother of yours —I suppose he has told you everything?"

"Enough to frighten me to death," said Mrs. Fleming. "But I'm afraid there's a lot more he didn't tell me. That's why I have come here. What does it all mean, Frank?"

Lord Lacey laughed again in his weak, good-natured way.

"It's all in the evening papers. The shares won't be worth a halfpenny to-morrow! Unfortunately they have got hold of my name and your husband's—as directors, you know. There are some rather nasty references to the poor old Colonel, and they drag in that Punjab affair—as though it had anything in the world to do with an oil company in West Africa! What fools those journalists are!"

"Does it mean that he loses a lot of money?" asked Mrs. Fleming anxiously.

Lord Lacey nodded. "We shall have to stand the racket, of course. I reckon I've dropped about three thousand. The Colonel stood in for more than that."

"On your advice," said Neville sternly.

Lord Lacey shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear Neville, don't keep rubbing that in! Of course it was on my advice. I wanted to put him on to a good thing, and showed my sincerity by putting my own money into it. Jack Rivington and Bill Beresford both assured me that they had the concessions and that the oil would be produced at the lowest cost, so that we could undersell the world. You've seen the prospectus."

"Yes," said Neville; "and even to my simple soul it stinks of fraud!"

"Well, the simple soul of the British public didn't think so," said Lord Lacey. "They swallowed it all right until those damn newspapers butted in with their impertinent suggestions. I still believe the thing is sound."

Neville raised his voice to a harsh note.

"You admitted five seconds ago that Beresford was an infernal scoundrel."

"Certainly," answered Lord Lacey, calmly. "But even scoundrels get on to a good thing sometimes. I'm not a fool, Neville. You forget I was an intelligence officer in the

last little war! It satisfied me all right, after elaborate investigations. All the world wants oil, and this looked like a rich yield. Several members of the Government——"

"It's too late for all that," said Neville impatiently. "The point is, how you are going to get out of this dirty business before the law gets to work? And how are you going to pay back the money you induced the Colonel to put in under false pretences?"

Lord Lacey's face flushed darkly.

"Look here, my lad, I dislike your way of putting things and the tone of your voice. Kindly remember that I happen to be your father, much as you may regret the fact. If there were any false pretences in this affair, they were put up by Jack Rivington and Bill Beresford, two of the most unmitigated blackguards in this country. The only blame attaching to me is over-credulity in their statements."

He turned to Mrs. Fleming with a nervous gesture.

"I hate saying harsh things about your brother, Helen. But we must face the truth. He has diddled us completely. I'm afraid those oil wells were mostly in his imagination. Of course there may be a substratum of truth——"

"Not a particle!" cried Mrs. Fleming. "He's a liar and a thief. He used my husband's money—three thousand pounds of it—for this mad gamble in oil, and he's played the fool with my business so that I'm drowned in debt again. Now he has fled the country—to the open spaces of the world, as he is pleased to say! I wish to heaven I had never set eyes on him again!"

She could not restrain the rush of tears to her eyes, and she put her gloved hands up to her face.

Lord Lacey was distressed by this emotion. There was nothing he hated worse than a woman's tears, though he had caused them more than once in his life.

"My dear Helen," he pleaded, "don't let's lose our self-control! It's an unfortunate affair, I admit, and, to tell the truth, it's something like a knock-out blow to me. One can't lose three thousand pounds at a time like this without serious inconvenience, absurd as it may seem in a man of my position. Neville here will have to do without that little allow-

ance of mine. But as far as the Colonel is concerned it won't be very serious, I imagine. He's always been a stingy fellow, from what I've heard. One of those saving souls. Six thousand or so won't ruin him, and the only thing to do is to pay up and look pleasant."

Mrs. Fleming shook her head, and wiped her eyes furtively.

"Keep smiling!" said Lord Lacey. "That's my philosophy of life. It helped me through the war, and I never lost my optimism when other fellows were wallowing in pessimism."

"And dying like flies in the trenches, while you kept smiling behind the lines," said Neville with tragic bitterness.

Those words stung his father like a slash across the face. But after a moment's heavy breathing he controlled his anger and spoke quietly.

"As for you, Neville, I desire to have no more conversation with you until you treat me with a respect due to our relationship. Don't expect me to contribute anything further to the cost of this delightful flat of yours, or to the other expenses of your somewhat futile life."

Presently he took up his opera-hat and left the room, with an air of dignity and displeasure. They heard the door shut in the hall beyond.

Mrs. Fleming had dried her eyes. She turned to Neville with despair in them.

"What am I to do, Neville? How can I tell my husband? All that money of his thrown away—stolen—by his own relations and me!"

"That's the devil of it," said Neville gloomily. "He has been swindled by his flesh and blood. It seems to make it worse."

"Bad blood on my side," she answered bitterly. "The reckless Rivingtons—gamblers and spendthrifts!"

She thought again of that great-grandfather whose ghost had stood behind her, as she had sometimes believed, in the rooms at Monte Carlo, and with a sudden flush of shame she remembered that night when she had played for high stakes and lost everything. Jack had done the same thing, not with

deliberate dishonesty, perhaps, but taking all chances in a big throw. He was no worse than she had been. They had both played a rotten game, and lost.

"The Colonel must be told," said Henry Carey quietly; it was almost the first word he had spoken in Neville's room since his first greeting. "It's only fair to let him know before he reads it in the papers. It's not nice reading, anyhow."

He had taken up one of the evening papers and fixed his monocle to read an article under "City News." It was a scathing attack on the Ibadan Oil Feld Development Company, with a personal reference to Colonel Fleming.

". . . We note that one of the Directors and chief shareholders is Colonel Richard Fleming, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., whose name was prominently before the public recently in connection with the ghastly affair in the Punjab for which he was severely censured and dismissed from his command. It seems strange and unfortunate that this Indian colonel, having disgraced the fair name of the British Empire by his massacre of Indian natives, should now be associated with a financial operation which can only be described as a deliberate swindle and one more of those unsavoury attempts to exploit mythical oil-fields which have already brought discredit upon many well-known names. We notice that among the other directors is Lord Lacey, whose distinguished record in the war will be somewhat tarnished, we fear, by this financial venture, of which the public has not heard the last, as we can assure them. . . ."

Henry Carey drew a deep breath after reading this unpleasant paragraph, and spoke again to Mrs. Fleming.

"If I might advise, Helen," he said timidly, "I think it would be well for some one to see your husband at the earliest moment. To-night, if possible. I think it is only fair that he should be told by one of his friends or relatives before he sees the Sunday papers. It might avert the very great shock. In any case, it's the right thing to do. Don't you think so, Neville?"

Neville agreed gloomily.

"It won't be a pleasant mission."

Henry Carey volunteered to undertake the mission, as an old friend of the family. There was a late train down to Oakwood on the Eastbourne line, unless it had been altered lately.

Mrs. Fleming put her hand on his sleeve and said, "It's kind of you, Henry. You always take my troubles on your shoulders."

But it was Neville who decided to go. He could motor down in a couple of hours, and get to Oakwood after dinner some time. It was his duty, much as he disliked it, considering that his father had been the chief cause of the Colonel's loss.

While Henry Carey was getting his hat in the hall, he spoke a word or two alone to Mrs. Fleming.

"This affair hits us all rather hard. I had an idea that I might ask for Sylvia one day. Well, it knocks that idea on the head. I'm down and out for this time."

"You're young," said Mrs. Fleming, pitifully, "and Sylvia can wait. We shall all be poor now. It will mean ruin, or something like it, to poor old Dick."

"As bad as that?" asked Neville.

Mrs. Fleming answered with a little cry of anguish.

"That brother of mine ought to be hanged!"

With Henry Carey she watched Neville get his car out of the garage in Lyall Street.

"A safe journey!" said Henry Carey. "Don't go too fast, Neville. That night motoring——"

Neville laughed with a note of his old levity, and put his foot on the accelerator.

"A smash would be in keeping with the general situation. Still, I'm all for safety first!"

He went at a great pace into Chesham Place and disappeared.

"Henry," said Mrs. Fleming, "do you think there's any hope of a little fun in the next world? There's nothing but misery this side of the deep ditch."

XXV

SYLVIA had introduced "her American" as she called him, to her father, who had invited him to lunch at the East India Club and then, at Sylvia's suggestion, for a week-end at Oakwood Court. Edward Hillier had wanted very much to see "the home of her ancestors" with that sentimental reverence for the romantic past which is strong in the American mind in spite of pride in a new civilisation unhampered by old traditions. He had heard all about the unhappy married life of Colonel and Mrs. Fleming from Lady Burford, and Sylvia had made no secret of it. It had made no difference to his purpose regarding Sylvia. "These things happen even in the United States!" he remarked, and not without humiliation mentioned the epidemic of divorce which was a blot on the social reputation of his country.

"It has been worse since the war," he told Sylvia. "We weren't touched as much as you were by the tragedy of it, but all the same it seemed to unsettle people's minds. Broke down the moral law, I guess. You'd be surprised how many men who went to France couldn't live with their wives afterwards. They came back changed—somehow. I don't hold with that sort of thing. If a man has once loved a woman I think he owes her all the loyalty of his heart and soul."

"Some women don't deserve loyalty," said Sylvia. "In any case marriage must be a very difficult affair. Always to live with the same person—it must get rather trying sometimes, don't you think?"

Edward Hillier suggested that he was prepared to risk it. He could think of nothing more wonderful than to live always with the same person if she happened to be adorable.

Sylvia found the conversation was drifting into dangerous channels. It seemed to her a very curious thing that any conversation with Edward Hillier was apt to become dangerous before three minutes had passed. It needed all her tact to keep it safe, and she knew that one day before long even her

tact would not prevail and she would find herself in deep waters with this good-looking young man who was quietly biding his time and being very patient with her evasion of his desire for more intimate revelation. She was rather alarmed, as she confessed to herself, in private moments of introspection. There was something in Edward Hillier's eyes which made her heart beat rather quicker than was quite pleasant to a girl so sure of herself as she had been. She found herself blushing ridiculously when he called to see her in Montpelier Square. She found herself thinking of his smile, and the way it twisted his very nice lips and lighted up that serious face of his. His way of shaking hands, with a firm, strong grip was rather thrilling to her. And his shyness, his modesty, his rather puzzled expression when she talked silly nonsense, his extreme politeness and old-fashioned courtesy, made him more attractive than most other men she had met about the world. He was certainly deplorably in love with her, amazing as it might seem, and he wasn't going back to America without telling her so. That was quite obvious.

But the most alarming thing was her own state of mind about him—the queer excitement and emotion which disturbed her when he was anywhere near her, when she felt the touch of his hand, even when she thought of him. She was almost inclined to believe that she was rather in love with him. Or was it merely the vanity of having him for a lover, so that she laughed sometimes when she was quite alone, and went singing about the house with an unnatural sense of happiness? She had read in books that those were true symptoms of that rather ridiculous passion. Well, it wasn't unpleasant, but it was quite absurd.

No good-looking American from Grand Rapids, or anywhere else, could break up her present scheme of life, which was already rather complicated. She had to look after Stephen and her mother, and she had to spend a good deal of time with her father who wanted her more and more, and she had to be kind to Sidney Swinton who might do something rash if she did not give him a certain amount of affection. Then there was Neville Lacey whom she really liked as a friend and playfellow more than any one else in

the world, and there was this adventure of life in England which she was finding full of splendid possibilities, and charming people who were kind to her, and endless interest. It was absurd to think that an American, however attractive, should carry her off to a furniture factory, goodness knows how many thousands of miles away, just because he had rather thrilling eyes and a pleasant way with him.

Yet it was at her suggestion that he was invited to a week-end at Oakwood Court, and she had some difficulty in persuading her father that it was merely a visit to satisfy Edward Hillier's interest in the old homes of England.

"I'm afraid he's interested in something more modern," remarked Colonel Fleming suspiciously. "In any case, I'm not very fond of Americans. In my opinion they let down the world when they allowed President Wilson to talk a lot of impracticable idealism and then withdraw from Europe leaving us in the lurch. Now they have most of the world's gold, put up barriers against our trade, and keep us poor by the payment of debts incurred in a common cause."

"All the same you'll be nice and kind to him, father!" pleaded Sylvia, and she mentioned the fact that he had fought in the war and spent some of the best years of his life in feeding the starving children of Europe.

She warned Edward Hillier that her father was slightly conservative in his outlook on life and not altogether tolerant of modern ideas. But the warning was not needed. Edward Hillier had heard the same thing from Lady Burford and was fully prepared. He had also read something about that affair in the Punjab, and he was bound to say that it seemed rather a sad business.

"All the same," he said, "we Americans can't say much about the way you treat the natives of India. We have our own colour question nearer at home, and I'm not sure that we should be any more tolerant in time of riot. It's best to keep off questions like that."

He was fairly successful for a time in keeping off most controversial subjects at Oakwood Court, and Colonel Fleming was favourably impressed by his courteous manners

—he addressed the Colonel invariably as "sir"—and by his enthusiasm for the old-world charm of the house.

"This is real old England!" he said. "Everything I've read about English history comes back in this old mansion. It just makes me proud that I've descended from the same stock. When one comes to a place like this one understands why the English people cling to the old traditions."

He put his hand on the oak panelling in the dining room as though the touch of it linked him up with centuries of history, and he was fascinated with the portraits of those soldiers in their quaint old uniforms who stared down from the walls on the last Colonel Fleming—so like them with his hawkish face and yellow-brown eyes.

All would have gone very well if it hadn't been for Aunt Elizabeth. She was extremely rude in her blunt, candid and intolerant way. Over the dinner table she gave her opinion of America and Americans, though Sylvia tried to steer the conversation to other subjects.

"I've no patience with that United States of yours," she said abruptly, after a pause in certain remarks about the weather from Aunt Anne.

"Hush, Elizabeth!" said Anne, nervously.

Edward Hillier smiled at Aunt Elizabeth's challenge and desired to know why she disapproved of the United States.

"A thoroughly selfish, money-grubbing and objectionable type of so-called civilisation," said Aunt Elizabeth stoutly, and when Aunt Anne whispered to her again she turned angrily and said, "I won't be hushed, Anne! I'm telling this young man something which is good for him to know. I have a right to express my opinions in my own way. The Americans never hesitate to express their opinions about us—our effete civilisation, as they call it, and our inefficiency, and our foolish reverence for the Royal Family, as they are pleased to express it. I can't pick up a newspaper without reading some impertinent opinion about us cabled across the Atlantic at great expense."

"The newspapers do a lot of harm," explained Edward Hillier amiably. "Some of the English criticism of the

United States doesn't make pleasant reading on the other side."

"I hope not," said Aunt Elizabeth. "I hope that it makes you a little conscience-striken now and then."

Edward Hillier smiled at Sylvia who touched his foot with hers under the table.

"What is your particular grievance against us?" he asked Aunt Elizabeth.

She answered sharply, ignoring her sister's pleading eyes.

"You came into the war too late and left it too early. That's one grievance! That President of yours, Wilson—pah, I despise the fellow!—too proud to fight, until things got too hot for him, and he was shamed into action. Then all that idealistic nonsense—the Fourteen Points and all that stuff! And his precious League of Nations! If Marshal Foch had been left to settle the business, Europe would have had a strong and certain peace. And you Americans weren't loyal even to your own man. You weren't loyal to France, after promising her security. You shouted 'We won the war!' after England and France had done all the dirty work and knocked the stuffing out of those damned Germans. Then you went back home and washed your hands of the whole business, and called on us to pay our debts, incurred by the purchase of American goods at twice the proper price. I don't call that sportsmanlike. It's not English anyhow!"

Even Colonel Fleming was shocked by this outburst from his sister, though secretly he agreed with her views.

"Elizabeth, I beg of you!" he said.

Aunt Elizabeth ignored her brother as she had ignored Aunt Anne.

"Now," she continued imperturbably, "when England is crippled with war debts, American millionaires come over here with their damned dollars and buy up our family portraits, our old furniture, the very panelling off our walls, and go back home to talk of the inevitable downfall of the British Empire and the decay of the English aristocracy. They have the impertinence to pity us. We decline to be pitied."

"I'm perfectly certain you've got it all wrong, Aunt," said

Sylvia rather hotly. "In any case, Mr. Hillier is an American and father's guest."

"That is why I'm expressing my opinion," said Aunt Elizabeth. "When he goes home he may say 'There's one old woman in England who had the courage to tell me the truth. She wasn't polite, but by Gosh!'—isn't that what they say?—'at least she was candid.'"

After that outburst Aunt Elizabeth drew a deep breath, as though having got a lot off her chest, and then laughed, and tapped Edward Hillier's hand.

"Now young man, I've had my say, and it's your innings. I shan't object if you're equally rude, though I shall disagree with everything else."

Edward Hillier smiled again and began to speak very quietly. There were many Americans who held critical views about President Wilson, he said. But he was a Wilson man. He believed that the President, in spite of some faults of character—lack of tact and intellectual arrogance perhaps—was one of the most sincere men who ever lived. He had raised certain ideals of world peace which surely, thought Edward Hillier, must remain as the ideals towards which humanity must strive, or perish. The League of Nations was pretty weak just now, partly, he admitted, because of the withdrawal of the United States, which he regretted, but in the future it might be the one instrument which would save Europe from another devastating war. Anyhow the spirit of the League of Nations which Wilson had left as a heritage must prevail if European civilisation could be saved. As for the selfishness of America, he could not altogether admit that. On the contrary, the people of the United States were anxious to be generous. They had been generous, he thought, in many ways. They had spent great sums of money in saving the stricken peoples of Europe from starvation. He had helped to spend some of that money which had come mostly out of the private pockets of people who were not enormously rich—plenty to do with their money!—but who spared something for hungry children in foreign lands. They had fed eleven million Russians for a whole year during the great famine. That wasn't exactly

selfishness. They got nothing out of it. As for American isolation, it came through fear of being mixed up in things they didn't understand—the quarrels of peoples, their hatred and jealousies. It mustn't be forgotten that millions of people had gone to the United States to escape all that heritage of hatred and the everlasting risk of war across their frontiers. They were afraid of being dragged in again to those old historic feuds. As for the payment of the British debts, he had held on to the idea that Great Britain would have been humiliated if the United States had offered to cancel them.

"You try us!" said Aunt Elizabeth. "I should swallow *my* humiliation all right!"

"In any case," continued Edward Hillier, with his slow persuasive smile, "we can't afford to do so, I'm told."

"Fudge!" said Aunt Elizabeth. "You're bursting with our English gold."

"Yes, but it's lying idle," said Edward Hillier, "and trade is not good just now. The Western Farmers are hard hit."

"Because Europe can't afford to buy their beastly grain," said Aunt Elizabeth.

Sylvia intervened in the argument which looked like being long, because of Edward Hillier's patience and his desire to explain. It was the only criticism she had against him in her own mind. He was apt to be a little long in explanation.

"I'm quite sure the United States know what they're doing, and are doing it rather well. I'm not so insular as you, Aunt. Owing to my foreign upbringing I don't believe that England is the only country in the world that keeps to the strict path of virtue and righteousness and possesses the only code of honour. It may be unpatriotic of me, of course."

"It is," said Aunt Elizabeth grimly. "I was always taught to believe that England leads the world in sporting instincts and the art of playing the game as it ought to be played. I see no reason why I should alter that belief."

"Other people acknowledge England's sense of fair play," said Edward Hillier generously. "The United States is not the last to do so."

Colonel Fleming gave a stern glance at his sister who was about to make some snappy answer, and he spoke quietly and courteously.

"I have no doubt there is a great deal of misunderstanding due to ignorance. We are extremely ignorant about the character and ideas of the United States, but perhaps you can enlighten us on one point. Is it true that the American people as a whole—apart from Canada, I mean—have a real hostility to England? I should be sorry to think so."

Edward Hillier spoke with emotion.

"No—sir! As far as I know my own people, and I think I know them rather well, there's a very real admiration for England, and among those of the old British stock, a very warm affection. Of course when you're talking about a big nation, and the United States is mighty big, whatever else she is there are all sorts of different views, and lots of prejudices, and all kinds of influences and reactions, which are not easy to measure up. All the racial strains in America—German, Scandinavian, Slav, Irish—re-act to any quarrel which may develop in their old nationalities against the British folk. That's natural. And of course, even the Americans of the old stock are brought up on school books that don't exactly flatter George III. and his ministers, or the Redcoats who fought against Washington."

"A traitor!" cried Aunt Elizabeth. "A rebel to his King and country! I despise him!"

Edward Hillier ignored Aunt Elizabeth with a little polite laugh, and turned to the Colonel again.

"We're living down the old prejudices, sir. Whatever else the war did, or didn't do, it certainly made us admire the British, and the way you've straightened things out since the war has done even more. We take our hats off to little old England. . . . And we're sorry if you don't like us and misunderstand some of our ideas."

"We do like you!" said Sylvia. "Speaking for myself and country, I may say that I like you quite a good deal."

She raised her wine-glass to him, and touched it with her lips, and he was very glad of that greeting.

Edward Hillier had had rather a hot time with Aunt Eliza-

beth, but he received an unexpected and ardent ally in Aunt Anne. She had been listening to him with deep attention, resting her pointed chin on her folded hands, and with a look of sympathy and agreement in her tired eyes. Now she flushed rather warmly and spoke emotionally, putting her hands down in her lap and twisting them nervously.

"I think what you said about President Wilson was splendid. The words he sent out to the world in a time of hatred and cruelty and lies—such tragic lies, called propaganda!—sent a thrill into every heart that was craving for some leadership which might lift us above the mud and blood. His ideals were Christ-like, when we were all devil-worshippers, tearing each other to pieces in the name of patriotism. He restored one's faith in justice and charity and human progress. In millions of trenches where men sat in filth waiting to kill or be killed they came as a promise of something better than that, some nobler code among nations —a promise to the younger men who might be left alive. When President Wilson came to Europe and passed through London and Paris it was as though a Prophet were passing. Men and women wept because of his promise to humanity. It may have been his fault that he failed. I don't know. He may have made mistakes—the greatest men do. But he tried to lift up the peoples of the earth to some new standard of international justice. He gave them the hope in the League of Nations. As for America, I am certain that one day the people of the United States will help very much in establishing liberty and justice and peace in the world. And I should hate you to think, Mr. Hillier, that my sister Elizabeth is typical of English opinion. I want to tell you that there are millions of English people who have a friendly feeling towards America and a very great respect. My sister Elizabeth is a very narrow-minded woman of the old school of thought, and most intolerant."

"And if you'll allow me to say so, Anne," said Aunt Elizabeth, "you're one of the most woolly-minded, sentimental, and pacifist fools that ever disgraced the name of Fleming and had the impudence to abuse your own flesh and blood."

"My sister Elizabeth," said Aunt Anne gently, and in an

explanatory manner, "belongs to the Die-Hard school of thought, which cannot tolerate the idea of liberty and thinks any effort towards world peace is contrary to the principles of Christianity and the doctrine of the Catholic Church."

"And my sister Anne," said Aunt Elizabeth, firmly but kindly, "has such a weak and undeveloped mind, deluded by the liberal and revolutionary Press, that she ought to be put into a home for the mentally deficient and not allowed to talk pestilential nonsense to unsuspecting people."

"I think, my dears," said Colonel Fleming, "that Mr. Hillier and I would like to have a quiet chat over our cigars."

"Elizabeth," said Aunt Anne, "I forgive you from the bottom of my heart for all those cruel things you have said."

"Then in that case, Anne," replied Aunt Elizabeth, "I shall probably be goaded into saying something unkind. If there's anything that puts my back up, it's forgiveness for faults of which I'm entirely innocent."

"Will you join us, Sylvia dear?" asked Aunt Anne.

XXVI

EDWARD HILLIER stayed rather long in the dining-room with Colonel Fleming, and when they joined the ladies Sylvia's quick eyes noticed an anxious look on her father's face which seemed to have grown older since dinner-time. As he passed her chair where she was playing chess with Aunt Elizabeth, who had taken her queen and was sweeping through her line of defence with Napoleonic strategy, he put his hand on her shoulder for a moment with a caressing touch.

"I daresay Mr. Hillier would like you to play a game of billiards with him when you have done with the chess-board," he suggested.

"I certainly should," said Edward Hillier, "if I'm not being too selfish."

Sylvia laughed, but could not prevent a blush from creeping into her cheeks. This conspiracy to give Edward Hillier his chance of private conversation was rather too obvious.

"Let's have a game of bridge," she pleaded. "That old billiard-room is rather cheerless, don't you think?"

But she was defeated this time by an adverse vote. Aunt Elizabeth wanted to write some letters. Aunt Anne excused herself on the plea of a headache, and the Colonel himself was called down to the study by an unexpected visitor, who was Neville Lacey.

"Ask him to come up," said the Colonel, but the maid answered that Mr. Lacey wished to speak to the Colonel on business.

"That's rather queer!" remarked Aunt Elizabeth suspiciously. "I hope you won't let him borrow money from you, Dick. It generally means that when a relative wishes to talk on business."

"I've no more money to lend," said the Colonel. "I've already put more than I can afford into his father's oil company. Fortunately it looks like a good thing. The shares have been rising rather sharply I notice."

"It's probably a swindle," said Aunt Elizabeth. "Almost certainly, if Neville's rascally father has anything to do with it. You can't say I didn't warn you, Dick. But of course you never will take my advice."

"I think it's a sound thing," answered the Colonel. "I notice the Press has boomed it a good deal lately. In any case I could hardly refuse to go in with Lacey when he put it up to me so strongly. Blood is thicker than water, after all."

"Yes, and relations are the curse of a good-natured man," said Aunt Elizabeth.

The Colonel seemed pleased with that remark.

"That's the first time I've been called a good-natured man, Betty! Most people call me a harsh old devil with the instincts of a murderer. That's my reputation in my own country."

"The Gutter Press," said Aunt Elizabeth, "and all those snivelling Socialists—Anne in one of her peace-at-any-price moods."

"My dear Elizabeth," said Aunt Anne with Christian meekness, "I trust that you will leave my name out of your conversation as much as possible. There's no reason why our political differences should lead to vulgar and personal abuse."

"Personal, but not vulgar, Anne," replied Aunt Elizabeth.

"What about that game of billiards?" asked Edward Hillier quietly, with a wistful glance at Sylvia.

"It looks inevitable," said Sylvia. "Come on, then."

She led the way to the billiard-room but met Neville Lacey in the hall as he was flinging his overcoat on the wooden bench outside the Colonel's study.

"Hullo, Neville!" she cried. "What's all this mysterious business? And where do you come from, anyhow? I thought you were staying in town for the week-end."

"So did I," said Neville. "But I had to motor down in a hurry with rather unpleasant news, I'm afraid."

He looked upset, thought Sylvia. She had never seen him with that worried look before.

"Nothing serious? Tell me."

"Later," he said. "After I've seen your governor."

For a moment he glanced at the American, and nodded, not in a very friendly way. Then he turned to the Colonel, who took hold of his arm in a kindly grip and said, "Come into the study, Neville. We can have a quiet talk there. I expect you want a whiskey after that long drive."

Neville kissed his hand to Sylvia, but something had gone out of his smile, she thought. His mask of carelessness was not so carefully adjusted as usual. She went with Edward Hillier into the billiard-room, and turned up the lights under the green shades and wondered what was the cause of Neville's distress and this motor journey from London.

"What kind of a cue do you like?" asked Edward Hillier.

"Middling," said Sylvia; "I miss the ball anyhow—and I expect you're a master!"

He was, and played some very pretty strokes, and showed Sylvia how to hold her cue and make a bridge with her fingers and get an idea of the angles, and he was enthusiastic when she made some brilliant flukes, and assured her she had a wonderful eye.

And then, after half an hour, he suddenly put his cue against the table and said, "Say, let's drop this game, don't you think? I've something serious to say if you won't be too bored while I say it."

"Let's go back to the drawing-room," suggested Sylvia. "It seems rather unkind to leave the Aunts alone."

But Edward Hillier put his back to the door and leaned against it, and smiled at Sylvia with a whimsical look.

"The Aunts will have to settle their political differences without our help for a bit. In any case, I have your father's permission to put a certain proposition before you."

"That sounds businesslike," remarked Sylvia, beginning to feel frightened.

"It's Big Business," said Edward Hillier, "the only business that makes life worth while. I mean everything else doesn't seem to matter."

"It must be very important," suggested Sylvia feebly. She wished that this young man did not look so resolute and

wouldn't stand with his back to the door. He had trapped her this time. There was no way of escape.

"Of course I know I'm rather handicapped," he continued, poking an old tiger-skin rug with the point of his boot. "Being an American in this house doesn't give me any advantage, especially after your Aunt's attack."

He laughed and glanced at Sylvia anxiously.

"Is this a political discussion?" asked Sylvia, trying to give the conversation a light touch.

"Not exactly," said Edward Hillier, "but it would be easier to say what I want to say if I were as English as this old door-post or those ancient beams overhead. I shouldn't seem so much of a foreigner to you, coming from a strange country that seems such a long way off, though it's no distance when once you're on the *Olympic* or the *Aquitania*."

"You don't seem a bit foreign," said Sylvia graciously. "But don't you think we might have another game of billiards instead of standing here and discussing geography?"

Edward Hillier laughed again, and thrust a hand through his short-cropped hair.

"I know I'm a long time coming to the point. That's not my usual way, but to tell the truth I feel mighty shy of saying the right thing. There's such a heap I want to say all at once, and I'm not a bit good at it, and I'm just scared to death in case you'll laugh at me and not take a darned word seriously. Not that I mind your laughing at me, because every time you laugh it seems to make the world look good, and it's the best music I've heard anywhere. You see, ever since I heard you laugh one day in Monte Carlo I've known that there was nothing else I wanted to hear so much. That night when I played the Pierrot to your Columbine I knew that the game was up, as far as I'm concerned, unless you'd go on playing it with me. Now what I want to ask you is just this: Do you think you could withdraw that idea of yours about the return ticket to the United States? Do you remember that objection of yours? Of course I'd love you to come out anyhow, but I want you to take a single ticket with me, you and I on one schedule as husband and wife. I'd just be crazy with joy, because I love you beyond all words,

and I'd do my level best to make you happy, and serve you with everything that I have in my heart and soul."

Well, there it was. He had come out with it fairly and squarely, in spite of all his shyness and the scared look in his eyes. He moved forward from the door and took Sylvia by the wrist and bent down to her and kissed her on the cheek.

"Oh, my dear," he said. "Do you think you could love me just half as much as I love you?"

Sylvia's face lost some of its colour. She didn't shrink from his touch or kiss, but let him pull her close to him and put his arm about her.

She laughed a little, and then felt her eyes fill with tears.

"I'm so young!" she said feebly. "It's all so alarming."

"What scares you?" he asked.

"Marriage," she said, "and love, and America, and lots of things!" She laughed again through that mist of tears in her eyes.

"Love's not frightening," said Edward Hillier. "It's great! And marriage is all right when it starts with love. And America is kind to those who like it. America would like you. Go crazy about you. . . . Say you love me. That's all I want to know. The rest's easy."

"I think I love you in a way," said Sylvia, "though I can't be too sure about it. You see I love so many people. You want to crowd them all out. That's what I don't like."

Edward Hillier was amused by that accusation. He was also overjoyed by her admission that she loved him—in a way.

"I won't do any crowding out, I promise you that! I'm not an egoist. If you'll love me just enough to be my wife you can have all the rest. I won't be jealous of them."

"There are all my friends," said Sylvia. "Neville Lacey and the Boy from Battersea, and Frank Lawton with his banjo, and little Count Goldoni who would probably jump over a precipice if he heard I had promised to marry an American. It isn't fair on them all. It doesn't seem like playing the game to go off with one man. Besides, I'm wanted in England. Father wants me. And so do mother

and Stephen. I really couldn't go to America with you. You must make up your mind to that."

"That's what I can't make up my mind to," said Edward Hillier. "I want to take you back with me. My job's over there, you see. And my father and mother are waiting for you. And Grand Rapids will hoist all its flags for you. I'll give you the United States, if you'll only come."

Sylvia put her hand on his head and rumpled his hair.

"I don't want the United States. I want dirty old London. If you'll stay here I'll promise to be kind to you, and if you're not in too much of a hurry I might even promise to marry you, though I'm sure some people will be very much annoyed."

Edward Hillier looked extremely worried.

"There's that furniture business in Grand Rapids," he said. "I've got to go back."

"Well, that settles it," said Sylvia. "I'm staying here. Of course if you prefer that furniture to my company, there's nothing more to be said, with many thanks for your kind offer, and hoping for further orders."

She was in her teasing mood again, and Edward Hillier was hurt by it, though he pretended to see the humour of it.

"There's a lot more to be said," he insisted. "I'm not going to leave England until you come with me. That's fixed."

"Then you'll die an old man at the Savoy Hotel," said Sylvia.

"What can I tell you to make you want to come?" asked Edward Hillier. "Why, you don't know the meaning of Grand Rapids! It's the prettiest place in the Middle West, and just crowded with people who will want to smother you with kindness. And although I'm not a millionaire or anything like that, I can make a great little home for you, and give you everything that's good to have. You'd be the leading lady, I can tell you that. And if you felt tired of Grand Rapids now and then, there's always New York less than a thousand miles away and yours to buy. A suite at the Plaza, the opera, art galleries, everything that you can find in Europe except antiquities—and even those. Then once a

year we'd come back to Europe and keep in touch. We'd stay in this old house again and brighten it up and keep the gardens in better trim. Three months every year, if the business is going well, or three months every other year anyhow. You'd be the mistress of both worlds, the New and the Old. And I'm sure you'd like the New World and find it good. And my love would be yours, always and for ever, big and strong and faithful and humble."

She had drawn a little away from him, but now she held out her hand with a quick gesture of comradeship, touched by his words and by the break in his voice. He raised it to his lips, and clasped her arm again, and drew her close again.

"Kiss me," he said, "kiss me."

She raised her face to his and let him kiss her on the lips, while again the colour ebbed from her face.

"You're frightfully persistent!" she said, "and I'm not a cold and heartless creature."

He put his arms tight about her, and kissed her again.

"But all the same," she reminded him, "I'm not going to the United States, first class or steerage. I'm married to Europe."

"It's the first time I've hated Europe," he said. "I never thought I should be jealous of it. But I want you to promise me one thing——"

"Promises are dangerous!"

He wanted her to promise that she would give him another week or two before turning him down.

"I've not turned you down!" she protested. "If you like to stay in England with me I'll adopt you as a very special friend. I'll even wear a ring as a sign of a provisional contract—just to see how it goes—if you like to buy me a pretty one."

"It's here at hand," he said gladly, and poked his finger into his waistcoat pocket and fumbled out a ring with five little pearls in its gold.

Sylvia liked the look of it. She even slipped it on the third finger of her left hand. But then she took it off again and held it out to him.

"Not if you don't stay in England!"

"That's awful!" he said. "Just as it looked fine and lovely, as though it were going to stay there for ever."

He looked disappointed and perplexed. Two little lines deepened between his eyebrows.

"I'll cable to my people," he said, rather desperately. "Wait until I get their answer. It's that furniture business. I'm under a pledge to my father. But there must be a way out. I wouldn't let the biggest business on earth stand between me and your love. I'll quit the United States if necessary and take out English papers and cultivate the real old accent, and adopt the Die-Hard programme. I'm thorough when I get going."

Sylvia decided to wear the ring at least until he had received an answer to his cable. She slipped it on her finger again, and let him kiss it as a sacred emblem.

"I'd be the happiest man on earth," he said solemnly, "if I hadn't committed high treason to the United States!"

He would have said much more if the door had not been opened suddenly by Neville Lacey.

He strode into the room without apology and spoke to Sylvia, not seeming to notice the American.

"The Colonel is asking for you," he said. "I brought him bad news and it's a bit of a shock to him. I'm frightfully sorry."

"In the study?" asked Sylvia, turning very pale.

Neville nodded, and held the door open so that she could pass him. She ran into the hall, and stopped for a moment outside the study door, with a sense of fear. Then she opened it and slipped in.

Aunt Elizabeth was there, bending over her father. He sat back in the leather arm-chair, clasping the arms with rigid hands. His face was drawn and white, but he smiled when Sylvia came in, and spoke cheerfully.

"It's all right. Don't be frightened, my dear. A touch of heart trouble. . . . I had it once before—in India."

He put his hand up to his side as though it hurt him, and drew a deep breath.

"I've sent for a doctor," said Aunt Elizabeth. Her com-

manding look had gone and she was just a frightened woman.

"Quite unnecessary," said the Colonel.

He clasped Sylvia's hand as she knelt on the floor by his side, and his touch was cold.

"Very foolish of me," he said. "Very weak. Neville brought some bad news. It took me rather by surprise."

"What news, father?" asked Sylvia.

It was Aunt Elizabeth who answered her. She spoke harshly with an anger that made her voice tremble.

"Nothing surprising to me, Sylvia! Only that your unfortunate father has been robbed by his relatives. Just enough to ruin the lot of us. Neville's father and your Uncle Jack, and that wicked mother of yours. A family conspiracy."

"Hush!" said the Colonel. "Poor Helen had nothing to do with it. I would like her to know that I don't blame her in the least."

He turned to his sister and spoke to her gently.

"I would like to speak with Sylvia alone. Sorry, Betty!"

Aunt Elizabeth protested that he was in no fit state to be left without her, but he assured her that he was perfectly well again after his foolish attack.

He rose from his chair and said, "I'm perfectly all right. Stop that doctor from coming. He'll only worry me."

"Better sit still, father," said Sylvia.

He put his hand on her shoulder and smiled.

"I gave your aunt rather a fright—and young Neville. It's nothing to worry about."

He looked at Aunt Elizabeth, and she took his hint grudgingly, and left the room with an anxious glance at him.

"Sylvia, my dear," he said, when he was alone with his daughter, "what about that American lover of yours? He asked me whether he might speak to you. What did you say?"

Sylvia blushed, and laid her head on her father's sleeve.

"I rather like him, father! . . . I'm rather inclined to marry him one day. But there's no hurry, and anyhow I won't go to America. That's settled."

The Colonel kissed her forehead.

"I should hate to lose you. I don't think I could bear it. I'm as jealous as a lover of you."

"I'm staying," said Sylvia.

"All the same," said the Colonel, "I'm not going to let my selfishness stand in the way of your happiness. I was selfish enough with your poor mother in our married days."

He gripped Sylvia's arm so tightly that he almost hurt her.

"Don't be in a hurry to marry, my dear. It's a dreadful hazard, nowadays. Difficult always. But when you do marry—for love—be sure it's for love—then stick to your man. Loyalty, that's the only safeguard. The old words, the beautiful old words, 'for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, till death do us part, and thereto I plight thee my troth!' Without that spirit of loyalty marriage is a horror, a living horror between two souls."

"Loyalty in all things," he said presently, after a little silence. "I want Stephen to be loyal to England. . . . I want him to serve it in the dreadful times ahead—which I fear are coming. *Semper Fidelis*. That's the motto of this house, and though we shall have to leave this old roof, the spirit must go with us, however poor our lodging. It's our heritage, and nothing can take *that* from us!"

"Leave this old roof, Father?" exclaimed Sylvia; "leave Oakwood? Why do you say that?"

He answered her very simply.

"I'm ruined, my dear. At least I'm going to be very poor. Your uncle Jack and cousin Frank—Neville's father—have let me in for heavy losses. I was a fool to take their advice. But I was afraid of being mean. I wanted to do the generous thing. Well, poverty doesn't worry me much. We can scrape along. . . . It's the loss of reputation that hurts me most. My honour—the thing I prized most in the world. See the things they say about me."

He crossed the room with a heavy tread and took from his desk the crumpled newspaper which Neville had brought down with him.

In a harsh ironical voice he read out a paragraph or two in the City news.

"'It seems strange and unfortunate that this Indian colonel, having disgraced the fair name of the British Empire by his massacre of Indian natives, should now be associated with a financial operation which can only be described as a deliberate swindle! . . .'

"Those are the words they use about me, Sylvia!"

He repeated that first phrase as though it put a black spell upon him.

"'Having disgraced the fair name of the British Empire . . .'"

"It's a horrible slander, Father!" cried Sylvia.

He drew a deep breath and looked beyond her with his far-seeing hawk-like eyes.

"I gave the best of my life to the British Empire," he said. "I can say like Wolsey, 'If I had served my God as I have served my King——' Now I'm disgraced and dismissed. There it is in cold print! I shall go down to history as a murderer, though I believed in chivalry and loved the Indian people. The irony of fate, eh? My little tragedy, among other tragedies. That married life of mine, broken by the infidelity of your mother, Sylvia. I don't blame her for this new thing that has befallen me. It's not her fault that her brother is a blackguard. But all the same, if I hadn't met Helen—your mother I mean—I might have escaped this second disgrace in my old age. She was a beautiful girl when I married her, Sylvia. I loved her body and soul, her laughter, her mirthful eyes. I'm in love with her still, though for years I tried to forget her. Tell her that I love her still, in spite of everything."

"Father!" cried Sylvia.

She was frightened by the way he spoke, and by those messages, and by the look in his face and a greyness that crept beneath his skin.

"It's this kind of thing I can't forgive," said Colonel Fleming. He struck the paper a heavy blow with his right hand, and let it fall at his feet.

"They don't understand," he said. "They don't try to understand. That crowd of natives, out for murder, in revolt,

masses of them, with blood in their eyes. They had killed three civilians and some of my men. They were surging round the women's quarters. If I hadn't given the order——"

"Father," asked Sylvia, "are you feeling all right?"

"I gave the order to fire," he said; "there was nothing else I could do. It was to save India. Behind that mob were millions of others in revolt. The flame would have spread like a prairie fire. I gave the order. Those dreadful words! I heard the machine-guns slashing into that crowd—the tattoo of death—and their shrieks, poor creatures. It was my execution as well as theirs. I died with them that day for the sake of the Empire. Duty. . . . My faith as a soldier. . . . My tradition."

He had forgotten Sylvia until she spoke to him again.

"Father, I'm afraid you're unwell. Let me go for someone——"

"What's that, my darling?" he asked. "No, I'm not unwell. It's this heart of mine. It behaves unexpectedly—sometimes."

It behaved unexpectedly then.

Sylvia felt his hand grip her shoulder convulsively. He swung round sideways and lurched heavily against a chair, and fell with a crash.

Sylvia ran to the door and opened it and gave a cry.

"Aunt Elizabeth! Neville!"

They hurried to her, and it was Neville and Aunt Elizabeth who lifted the Colonel on to the old horse-hair sofa by the side of the bookcase.

The doctor came too late.

XXVII

COLONEL FLEMING'S death made a great change in the lives of several members of his family and of some others to whom this Indian Colonel had been a stranger until recent days. It was remarkable, for instance, that the life of a young man from Grand Rapids, U.S.A., should be affected profoundly by the tragic death of an English gentleman of the old caste in whose house he had been a guest for the first time and whose name had been wholly unknown to him a few months before. It was curious also, as a proof of the mysterious way in which the human plot works out, that the death of Colonel Fleming by that sudden heart seizure was far more important in its consequences to his family than his life had been for the best part of his career. Out in India he had been forgotten or put into the background of memory even by those most nearly related to him, including his wife.

His cousin Burford had never given a thought to him until that tragic affair in the Punjab. Neville Lacey had heard of him for the first time from his father when the newspapers denounced the shooting of Indian natives. Even the two aunts—Elizabeth and Anne—had had but a pale and dimmed remembrance of the brother in whose house they lived and from whom they had received a quarterly allowance sufficient for their needs, and not more than that. To Sylvia and Stephen he had been, until recent months, the unknown father who had behaved cruelly to their adorable mother and then deserted her, according to their former belief. Yet his death altered everything, changing the conditions of their present life and shaping the future.

To some of them it was a blow threatening the destruction of all security and happiness, as in the case of those two aunts who might find themselves without a roof over their heads, and penniless. To Mrs. Fleming it was a moral blow worse than that, because in her emotional mind was the dreadful thought that it was her folly which had helped to

kill her husband—those debts which she had allowed to pile up in Bond Street, and her incredible trust in the honesty of her brother Jack. The news of the Colonel's death broke her down, and she wept bitterly, conscience-striken, and haunted by old memories. The years of separation were wiped out. She remembered only those early days when this man had loved her with a very ardent and splendid love. She did not think any more of his harshness, but of his tenderness.

A thousand memories of that early married life which had slipped out of her mind for years came flooding back, as a drowning person sees the whole picture of his life. He had loved her laughter so much. . . . He had liked to see her with her hair down! . . . Once he had cried when he had to leave her for some frontier fighting. . . . He looked so stern and strong, but underneath it all he had been weak in his love for her. One day, down at Oakwood Court before they went to India, he had lain on the lawn at her feet—she was in a low hammock tied to an apple tree—and he had made a daisy chain for her, like a school-boy for his sweetheart, and he had put it round her hair and said no queen was ever so beautiful. . . . Little things like that, the most trivial incidents, came back to her now that he lay dead.

Out in India she had worried him by her flirtations with other officers, but he had been wonderfully patient with her until he had discovered her treachery. How she had lied to him! And how simply he had believed her lies until he found out! She would never forget the change in his face that day, the look of horror in his eyes. He had threatened to kill her in his first wild rage. After that he had wept. It was she who wept now. She would have given everything in the world for the chance of going down on her knees to him, imploring his forgiveness, holding him in her arms again, crying out, "Dick, my dear!" before he died. Perhaps in that last moment before death they might have become reconciled, and remembered only the first days of their love, and promised to wait for each other beyond the grave. . . .

Mrs. Fleming wept so bitterly at the funeral that she surprised the other mourners who knew her history, and Aunt Elizabeth, who was dry-eyed, called her "a damned hypo-

crite" to Neville Lacey, in a voice that was audible at the grave-side.

There had been a dreadful scene with Aunt Elizabeth that night of the Colonel's death. Upstairs in the drawing-room, where the chess-board was littered with the pieces after the game which Sylvia had played with her, she denounced Neville's father as a rogue and a blackguard, and Jack Rivington as an infamous scoundrel who would look fine on the end of a rope, and Mrs. Fleming as an immoral creature who had broken her brother's heart, swindled him out of his money, and killed him by her villainy.

Sylvia felt so stunned by her father's death and was so dissolved in tears that she had listened to Aunt Elizabeth's accusations without a word until at last they had become intolerable. Then she had sprung up and said. "How dare you speak of my mother like that? It's disgraceful, with father lying dead downstairs. His last words were a message of love to mother."

"My dear Sylvia," said Aunt Elizabeth, "it's because your father is lying dead downstairs that I dare to speak of your mother as I do. I will never forgive that vile woman for the tragedy of that poor man's life. Now she has brought us all to ruin."

It was Aunt Anne who intervened. She put her arm round Sylvia and rebuked her sister.

"In the presence of death," she said, "there should be no words but prayer. If we have any love in our hearts let us pray that our dear Colonel may find eternal peace."

It was Aunt Anne who watched all night by the body of the brother from whom once she had shrunk because, as she had told him, he had blood on his hands. In that night of watching, as afterwards she told Sylvia, she remembered that act of blood which had haunted the Colonel's mind, and over and over again she whispered the words of her faith:

"Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop, O Lord, and I shall be cleansed: Thou shalt wash me and I shall be made whiter than snow."

It was before dawn, kneeling there in the Colonel's study where candles burned dim—she had lighted them at his head and feet—that she had a vision of her brother. He was in his uniform, as she had seen him once at a King's Levee, with all his medals on, and his face was transfigured with youth, and his hands were white and shining, and all about him were Indian men and women in their native clothes, with smiling and friendly eyes.

"Our dear brother has found peace and forgiveness," said Aunt Anne when she confided this vision to her sister. But Aunt Elizabeth was only confirmed in her worst suspicions about Anne's mentality.

Edward Hillier had been quietly self-effacing and deeply sympathetic. After a few words with Sylvia he had gone to his room in order not to obtrude his presence as a comparative stranger to most of them in this family tragedy. It was a sad ending to a day which otherwise would have been the happiest in his life because of Sylvia's promise to him. He kissed her hand before going to his room and said, "I'm terribly sorry. Please let me know if there's anything in the world I can do." There was nothing he could do then, with death in command.

Late that night Neville and Sylvia were left alone in the drawing-room. All Neville's flippancy had left him under the shock of this event, and he spoke gravely and seriously. The thing that hurt him most was his father's share in the business that had laid the Colonel low, but he defended Lord Lacey from Aunt Elizabeth's most violent accusations.

"I don't believe it was downright dishonesty," he said; "it was just his usual recklessness and wild optimism. He was like that in the war as an Intelligence Officer. The Germans were always 'starving and demoralised.' We were always going to 'break through.' The enemy's front line trenches were always 'thinly held,' and in consequence our officers and men always got it in the neck! Do you remember that story of Frank Lawton's? That was typical."

"Neville," said Sylvia, "do you think it means ruin? I mean, will this house have to go, and all the rest of it—the

two aunts homeless, and mother without a penny, and Stephen having to leave the Slade School?"

"Not as bad as that, I should say," answered Neville. "The Colonel must have had a little capital. But of course, now, with death duties, and those debts, there won't be much to go round. I expect this house will have to be sold, like so many others."

He looked up at the old beams across the ceiling and groaned.

"The end of the House of Fleming . . . Poor old England!"

Some secret thought seemed to lead his mind away down some long trail. Presently he revealed it.

"I shall have to clear out, anyhow. My father has cut me off from that little allowance which kept me undernourished. Well, perhaps it's as well! I may become an honest man and do a job of work. I'm thinking of Canada."

"Oh, not so far as that!" cried Sylvia.

"I can earn a living wage out there, maybe," he said, "if they've any use for a pair of hands, and a man who can ride a horse. Better than lounging as an out-of-work. If I have any luck I might even earn a bit of money and pay back my father's debt to the poor old Colonel. Still that's going a bit far in optimism."

"Oh, Neville," said Sylvia miserably, "I shall be fearfully lonely without you!"

Neville smiled at her. It was the first time he had smiled that evening.

"It's nice of you to say that! I thought you had tired of my company. That American fellow——"

Sylvia revealed herself in a sudden confession. The death of her father, the thought of his body downstairs, seemed to make it easy to talk straight, in simple truth. One cannot lie or hide oneself in the presence of death.

"I believe I'm in love with him," she said. "What do you think about it, Neville? I love you, too. I think I shall never like any man as much as I like you. We seem to belong to each other like brother and sister. Your mind is rather like mine. We understand each other and there's the

same blood in us and I think wherever you are in the world you and I will belong to each other in a way. It's more than friendship. It's a spiritual kinship, if you know what I mean. But Edward Hillier makes me feel differently about him. He excited me somehow, and yet he's a perfect stranger in a way! I don't know what's passing in his mind, sometimes. He thinks in a different language. But he has caught hold of me all right. I like him most frightfully. And I believe I'm ready to marry him. Anyhow I've had a half promise to him, and I'm wearing his ring."

She held out her hand to Neville and showed him that ring with its five little pearls.

For a moment he stared at it gloomily and then turned his face, striding to the other end of the room. Sylvia did not know, and never knew, that he suffered an agony in those few moments.

He came back and stood in front of her, and smiled down upon her.

"Here's happiness!" he said. "I hope you'll find it with that American."

"Don't you like him?" asked Sylvia anxiously.

"Oh, he seems all right," said Neville lightly. "But I hate anybody who wants to take you away."

Sylvia took hold of Neville's hand for a moment.

"Don't be jealous, Neville dear! I shan't go far with him. I shall make him stay here. That's the bargain."

"You'll be away, anyhow," said Neville. "Lost for ever as far as I'm concerned."

She would not hear of that and thought it would make no difference to their friendship. She refused to let it make a difference to any of her friends.

"What a child you are!" said Neville, with his superior knowledge of life.

Once in that talk of theirs that night while the Colonel's dead body lay downstairs, Neville became rather emotional and took off his mask, as Sylvia called his reserve, just for a moment. It was when she said good night to him.

He took her hands and said, "I'm frightfully sorry about

the poor old Colonel! The last of the old school, and one of the best."

Sylvia broke down and cried again, and Neville drew her close to him and kissed her, and held her in his arms until some sense of guilt seemed to shock him.

"That American of yours!" he said; "he wouldn't like this, would he?"

"I like it!" said Sylvia, still crying, with her head on his shoulder. "I feel so wretched, Neville."

"Sylvia," said Neville, in a low voice that trembled strangely, "couldn't you chuck that American and wait for me? It seems a cad's thing to say—to-night—but I believe you and I were meant for each other. I'd find some work somewhere. One day I may come into a bit of money—enough to make a home for you. I'm a bit of a rotter, but I'd make things happy for you. And you belong to England. To hell with the United States! We can't spare you over there."

"Cousin Neville!" said Sylvia, "dear old Coz! You know you're talking nonsense. . . . And anyhow I've made a promise. Look at that little ring."

He drew a deep breath and his arms went limp and dropped to his side.

"Yes," he said, "I'm talking nonsense. I haven't a bean in the world, and anyhow you've found your man. . . . Well, good night, my dear."

It was the last time they kissed again before her marriage.

It was a marriage in a hurry, within three months of her father's death. Edward Hillier swept her off her feet by his passionate purpose and wealth of generosity, and she agreed to go with him. He took charge of Mrs. Fleming's affairs, straightened out all her tangle of debts in Bond Street, paid them off by writing a few words on a neat little cheque, and said, "That's easy!" It was he who arranged for the sale of Oakwood Court to one of his American friends who had married in England and wanted an old English home. "One day we'll buy it back again," he said, "though I can't afford it now." It was he who made things pretty good for the Aunts by setting them up in a country

cottage, with a small annuity out of the Colonel's estate, which would not leave much after the payment of death duties. And it was this young man from Grand Rapids who was going to make an allowance to Mrs. Fleming and guarantee the rent of Stephen's studio and his studies at the Slade School.

It was the money he spent in paying off the Bond Street debts that seemed to hurt Sylvia's pride, in spite of her gratitude.

"It looks as though you're buying me," she cried. "People will think I'm marrying you because of your dollars."

"Not a chance of that!" he answered. "I'm a poor man as dollars go in the United States. Not one of the millionaires, nor anywhere near it! They'll think it mighty swank of me to marry an English girl related to half the aristocracy; and so it is."

"When you wrote that cheque for mother," insisted Sylvia, "I was bought and paid for. That's what the Bank Manager thought when I went in with you the other day. I could see it in his eyes. 'English export—fragile—cash on delivery.'"

Edward Hillier threatened to break every bone in the Bank Manager's body if he saw anything remotely resembling such an idea in his eyes. And as for Sylvia's feeling about that little cheque, surely it was a duty and a privilege to be of some slight service to his future mother-in-law, especially as she was so tremendously generous to him. He had written a cheque for a few dollars, a free gift from his father. She was giving him the daughter on whom she had lavished so much love and whose comradeship she would miss so terribly.

"Edward," cried Sylvia, "I've a good mind to break my promise! I don't think even now I can bear to leave old England, and mother and Stephen and all the others. Why can't you stay over here?"

She had asked that question a hundred times, and he had answered it patiently.

It was impossible for him to stay in England. That had been made perfectly clear in the cable from his father who was relying on him to run the factory. He had made it clear

to Sylvia, very gently and very urgently, and with such persuasive pleading that she had yielded at last and given him her pledge. How could she hold out against this promise to go with him, after all that generosity of his? She had to play fair. She could not take all and give nothing. This American marriage of hers, as Aunt Peggy explained, would make things very easy for her mother and Stephen. The Hilliers would be glad to help their English relatives. They would feel it a duty to do so. They could afford to do so. If Sylvia had anything more than a selfish love for Edward Hillier, said Lady Burford, she could surely endure the United States for nine months in the year! It would be another link in Anglo-American friendship. . . .

The last part of that argument did not appeal to Sylvia, but she saw force of the first part. It would be a frightful wrench from her mother and Stephen, and from all her friends in Europe—and from Europe! But there was no alternative except in cowardice and selfishness. Supposing she refused to go with her American lover? Supposing he sailed alone next time on the *Aquitania?* It would be the meanest thing after all he had done for her mother and Stephen. It would be a confession that her love was worthless, a mere mockery of his devotion. And during those three months following her father's death she was sure of her love for him. He had made her sure by his chivalry, his tenderness, his worship of her, his delicacy of mind and soul. He was gold all through, a "very parfit gentil knyghte" —with an American accent!—looking out upon life with a desire for service, pity for suffering humanity, love of humble folk and all children, and yet with a glinting humour sometimes and a gift of laughter. She spoke to him one day in the words of Ruth:

"'Whithersoever thou shalt go I will go, and where thou shalt dwell I will dwell, and thy people shall be my people.'"

And there was something in her voice which told him she was not mocking, so that he took her in his arms and said, "Thank God for that." And yet after those words she gave

way to a passion of tears because of all they meant to her.

Stephen was against her marriage, and that made it harder.

"What on earth do you want to go to America for?" he asked a hundred times. "Why can't you stay at home with mother and me? Damn that American and his dirty dollars!"

It was not unkindness. She knew that. It was his love for her which made him rage against this thought of separation. And the thought of leaving Stephen broke her down more, even, than the thought of leaving her mother. They had been together from the first moment of babyhood. They had never been separated even for a day. They had slept in each other's arms as children, and their very quarrels, fierce and noisy sometimes, had been only proofs of comradeship. They had discussed life together, read the same books, strolled around the world as though it were their peepshow, never dreamt of a day when their ways would divide. She would miss Stephen as a part of herself. And he still needed her! He was so young and helpless without her. Any hussy might get hold of him. Even now he was entangled with Nancy Swinton and her copper-coloured hair, and she would lead him a dance before she had done with him.

"You must come out and stay with me," she told him, over and over again. "I shall die if I don't see you. Mother must come too. Edward has a house large enough to hold us all, and he's tremendously fond of you and has lost his heart to mother."

"He's not going to marry the whole blinking family," said Stephen gloomily. "That sort of thing doesn't work. In any case I've got to go through with the Slade School. I'm determined to get free of this charity business. I'd rather starve to death. . . . Perhaps I shall do so anyhow. Art's as cheap as dirt nowadays. People buy motor-cars instead of pictures."

"One day the world will acknowledge your genius," said Sylvia. "Then you'll buy the motor-cars."

"Look here," he said, "chuck that American of yours. You'd do far better to marry Frank Lawton and pitch your

camp in the studio next door. He's absolutely gone on you, poor devil. As for Sidney, you're smashing him up. Ever since he heard of your engagement he has been like a crushed worm!"

"I shall come back every year," said Sylvia. "We'll have wonderful times together. I'll play the Lady Bountiful in Chelsea and feed all you starving artists on the richest buns."

She spoke gaily enough, but felt inclined to howl her eyes out. Stephen's gloom made it so difficult to keep merry and bright, and she hardly dared stay in the studio when Sidney Swinton and Frank Lawton came in because of their reproachful and melancholy eyes. Frank Lawton was almost worse than Sidney because he would play the gay little tunes on his banjo which had made this room so merry when the light was on, and the tea-kettle boiling on the stove and the muffins toasting, in the days when she had first known London—a few months ago, though it seemed much longer than that. Whenever she heard those tunes—perhaps in some far-off American town—she would come back in spirit to this room of Stephen's and feel at home again, until she remembered her exile.

Frank Lawton said never a word to her about her coming marriage until he brought her a wedding present one day. It was one of his pictures of a London street on a rainy day. At least he said that was the subject.

"It will remind you of home when you go out there," he suggested. "Perhaps it may remind you also of a poor devil of an artist who worshipped beauty."

It was to her beauty that his eyes paid homage then.

Sidney Swinton did not give her a wedding present. She had a rather tragi-comical scene with him when she laughed a little but felt sorry.

"You'll lose your soul in America," he said despairingly. "Those people are gross materialists. Until they're swept by revolution and suffer in blood and tears they won't be cleansed of their mammon worship. I would rather you had married that fellow Lacey than an American millionaire. In any case it's the finish of me. Life has no further meaning as far as I'm concerned."

"Rubbish!" cried Sylvia. "I don't believe you love me at all. You're in love with a poetical idea, an abstract impossibility, like Labour and the United States of Europe."

Before the day of her wedding he took the train to Dorking and walked moodily as far as Guildford where, as Stephen wrote to her afterwards, he made himself deliberately drunk on thin beer, and quarrelled with a Tory farmer who was denouncing the Labour Party and all its works.

The day before her wedding was like an April day in the heart of Sylvia. She laughed almost as much as she wept. She felt "frightfully happy" and "frightfully unhappy," as she remarked more than once. Marriage seemed to her an absurd adventure, with much that was ridiculous, and yet with considerable attractions. She was certainly tremendously in love with Edward, who was as shy as a school-boy when he came to see her trousseau. She teased him deplorably, and would not let him kiss her at first downstairs in the drawing-room of the little house in Montpelier Square, because she said he was nothing but a Red Indian who was taking her home as a squaw to his wigwam in Grand Rapids. She used that phrase "bought and paid for" again, and hurt him a good deal, until she took the pain out of his eyes by dragging his head down and kissing his forehead.

"To-morrow!" she said, "then I'm yours for ever. What a horrible prospect for you!"

And that night she wept her eyes out in her own bedroom after another scene with Stephen, who cursed her American with lurid curses—though he liked Edward Hillier a good deal—and after a long talk with her mother who was emotional, anxious, unhappy, and on the verge of hysteria.

"Sylvia—oh, my dear!—are you sure you love him?"

"Yes, mother! Do you think I'm doing this for fun?"

"Without love, marriage is the most horrible torture on earth. Even with love it's full of danger and trouble and disillusion. I'm scared to death, my darling. I don't think you understand what marriage means."

"I understand, and I'm not afraid," said Sylvia. "Only I hate to leave you. I don't think I can!"

They both cried at the thought of that separation.

"Mother, you must come out with Stephen," said Sylvia. "In three months' time. Promise!"

"I married the best man in the world," said Mrs. Fleming presently. "I loved him as much as he loved me, with heart and soul, and then I wrecked his life and mine! That was *my* marriage. That's the hazard of the game. The eternal hazard. The serpent comes into Paradise. Oh, Sylvia, I'm afraid! You're so much like me. You've my blood in you, my reckless, wild blood."

"I've something of father in me," said Sylvia.

"Sylvia, my darling, remember my tragedy! Don't take any risks. Don't play with fire. Some men are vile—so many of them. Beware of your husband's friends, especially the good-looking ones. Get friendly with nice women."

"Oh Lord!" cried Sylvia. "You're getting morbid, Mother."

"I feel morbid," said Mrs. Fleming. "I'm broken-hearted at the thought of losing you."

She wept again with passion and her tears were wet on Sylvia's face.

It was an early morning marriage, and at three o'clock next afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Edward Hillier sailed from Southampton on the White Star liner *Olympic*. Somewhere on the other side of the world Grand Rapids waited for them.

XXVIII

THE tremendous adventure of the voyage to the New World in the finest state-room on "B" deck of the *Olympic* was so thrilling to Sylvia that it was only now and then that she desired to fling herself overboard and swim back to Europe. She had those moments of morbid home-sickness when she cried so much that her eyes were red, and half-way across the Atlantic she was so panic-stricken by a night-mare that Stephen had fallen ill and was on the verge of death, that she made her husband send a wireless message to Montpelier Square saying, "Is Stephen all right?" The answer came with miraculous rapidity: "Stephen perfectly well; dearest love from both. Mother." That quick answer reassured her wonderfully. After all, there was no such thing as distance nowadays. She could not be so far away as she had imagined. Even the voyage of eight days which had seemed so long in prospect across the great grey sea, and interminable for the first three days, slipped away so quickly that on the seventh day when Edward said, "We shall sight old Liberty to-morrow morning!" it seemed unbelievable that a week had gone by.

Everybody on board had been kind to her, and she had been a success at the Captain's table, especially with the Captain, of whom Edward pretended to be jealous because he monopolised her conversation, challenged her to deck quoits, and invited her to tea in his cabin with other favourite ladies. Then there was the purser, who danced with her more often than Edward liked, and chose her to distribute the prizes for the deck sports, and paced the decks with her, discussing the latest novels and "putting her wise" about the United States.

Edward's pretence of jealousy amused her a good deal and there was just a touch of truth in it. He confessed that he was jealous of the very wind which kissed her cheeks and played with her hair. His love was rather frightening sometimes, because he was so possessed with it that he thrilled to

her slightest touch, and made himself her slave. She had the happiness of this young man—who had seen so much of life—in the hollow of her hand. That frightened her, as she told him, because it was an awful responsibility. Supposing she disappointed him? What would happen if she let him down? How could she live up to his exalted idea of her as the most beautiful, the most adorable, the most exquisite of God's creatures? "Because, you know," she said, "I'm none of those things. I have an uncertain nose which spoils my beauty, an uncertain temper which you will not find adorable after this honeymoon idyll, and I'm not the most exquisite of God's creatures—alas, dear Edward!—but, on the contrary, a rather commonplace little thing without any of that high idealism and nobility of thought which I feel ought to belong to your wife."

He told her that she did not know herself. She underrated herself with a wonderful modesty. He happened to know. She could take it from him that there was no other girl in the whole world who was so perfectly marvellous.

Well, of course, that was pleasing. This love that had come to her was undoubtedly the miracle of life. She had not imagined it to be half so glorious, and in spite of homesickness in those morbid moments, she was ridiculously happy. And perhaps it was that happiness in her eyes, in her laughter—she laughed too much!—in her excitement and delight with this Atlantic voyage and every detail of the big luxurious ship, which made people's eyes soften when they looked at her, and won the Captain's heart and wasted the purser's time, and induced many of the passengers to ask Edward for an introduction.

There were interesting people on board and Sylvia liked to talk to them, but it was Edward who noticed that they were all the Europeans and never the Americans. He introduced many of his countrymen to her: elderly business men, of enormous wealth, no doubt, managers of banks and railroads, one or two senators, an oil magnate, a leading publisher, and they bowed over her hand and said, "Delighted to meet you, Mrs. Hillier!" and gave her the homage of smiling eyes. They hoped she would like her adopted coun-

try, and said the United States would do its best to please her, and made little compliments which were nice to hear. But though she answered graciously and had no kind of prejudice against these grey-headed, clean-shaven, distinguished and prosperous-looking gentlemen, she found herself more amused with other types of humanity. They were the people with whom she felt most at home in spirit and understanding—a little Russian lady, as beautiful as a fairy thing, who was going out to the Russian ballet; a French portrait-painter who had been commissioned by the leading lady in New York society and hoped to make his fortune on the strength of it; a French colonel who was visiting the headquarters staff of the American Army, an Italian countess who was the sister-in-law of a fruit grower in California, a Belgian poet who was going to make a lecture tour from coast to coast.

It was pleasant to Sylvia to meet these people and to chatter again in French and Italian, and she was so often in the midst of that group of foreigners that passengers who did not know Edward believed she was one of them. The French colonel was devoted to her because he did not speak a word of English. The Belgian poet was touched because she could quote from one of his own poems. The Russian dancer insisted on holding her hand and telling her how much she hated the idea of New York, and the Italian countess screamed with laughter and talked Italian nineteen to the dozen at reminiscences of little Goldoni who had been her lover.

With these people Sylvia found conversation easy. She knew their countries, their ideas, their ways of thought, and she forgot that it must be just a little boring to Edward who did not know a word of what they were saying, though he was wonderfully good-humoured and patient. Only once did he make a slight remonstrance. It was when she translated part of a general conversation she had had with these foreign friends. They had pitied her because she had married an American and was going to live in exile in some western city.

"It will be a living death, *carissima!*" said the Italian

countess. "American women have the dull morality of German housewives, and no understanding of life's beauty. When they need a little wickedness they go to the cinema and get a false emotion out of the vampire performances of Theda Bara. American men believe that God is on the side of Big Business, and make love to a woman by telling her the story of their rise to fortune in interminable monologues."

"I could not live in a new country," said the Belgian poet. "Never to see an ancient cathedral, never to come across an old cottage, never to feel the spell of old traditions and old ghosts in places haunted by history . . . that to me would be terrible."

He, too, pitied Sylvia.

"You belong to Europe," he said. "Its spirit pervades you to the finger tips. One day Europe will call you back with a loud, irresistible cry."

The French colonel said there was only one place on earth in which civilisation dwelt. Paris was the heart, brain, and soul of the world. He could not understand any one who had ever been to Paris for longer than a Cook's tour desiring to live elsewhere. Certainly not a charming lady who had actually been brought up in Paris and who spoke French with a Parisian accent, and who knew the literature and art and life of France.

"As for the Americans," he said, "I do not wish to be disrespectful to the country from which madame has chosen her husband, but speaking candidly, and not unkindly, I must admit that I regard the people of the United States as the greatest menace to the world. They are emotional without intelligence. They are a collection of races without being a nation. They mistake abstract idealism for practical morality. They have a tremendous vitality and efficiency and strength undirected by any historical tradition or by any conscious purpose, except the pursuit of wealth. They are verbal sentimentalists and professional advocates of liberty, but at heart they are intolerant of free thought or free action, they scorn the rights of the individual, they have a blind worship of the State, and they wish to lay down the law to

the world with a self-righteousness that to me is repulsive."

He, too, pitied Sylvia.

"I am afraid, *chère madame,* that after a little while the United States will become very tedious to you."

Sylvia had laughed at all that, but she remembered it sufficiently to tell Edward in their state-room where he sat with his arms about her. He was just a little troubled, and suggested that it would be better if she did not spend so much time with the foreigners, but learnt to know some of his American friends who were now her own compatriots.

"I do not think much of people who criticise the United States for the pursuit of wealth," he said rather bitterly, "while they are actually crossing the Atlantic to grab some of the dollars they profess to despise. That Belgian poet with his delicate and sensitive soul is asking the American people to pay three dollars for a seat at one of his lectures in the Carnegie Hall. He'd feel mad if they suggested that he was selling his beautiful idealism at too much a word. And that French colonel who talks of our self-righteousness after proclaiming that Paris is the heart and soul of civilisation! As for the Italian countess, she ought to be whipped. I don't suppose she's more morals than a Persian cat. American women have no use for creatures like that. They've too much self-respect."

Sylvia rumpled her husband's hair.

"I'm sorry I told you. . . . And I like your defence of your own people to whom I have the honour of being married, whether they like it or not."

Once or twice, not at that time but nearer New York, she asked rather anxious questions.

"American husband! Do you think the New World will like my style? . . . Do you think I shall be serious enough? . . . Suppose I laugh at the wrong things? . . . Suppose I don't behave as a wife should, according to the highest code of Grand Rapids? . . . I'm getting very nervous!"

He reassured her, as he always did.

"They'll fall in love with you at first sight. They'll go crazy over you."

He was much more doubtful as to whether she would like America. Sometimes he was rather afraid she might detest his country. Well, he would do his best to make her like it. He would be a devoted lover and husband. He would buy the world for her!

They stood hand in hand together on the boat deck as the first sight of New York appeared vaguely through the haze over the water, and when, a little later, the whole city with its high fantastic skyline was clearly visible as the morning sun, and the racing wind seemed to draw up a curtain and reveal its panorama.

Sylvia gave a cry.

"It's like a dream! It can't be real! It's a city drawn by H. G. Wells in a mad vision!"

"New York," said Edward; "what do you think of that?"

Sylvia stared at the tall skyscrapers rising like the walls of some stupendous castle of giant kings, touching the clouds. As the *Olympic* crept up with a little crowd of tugs about her, every detail of the city front became clear and hard in a sharp light. Thousands of windows glistened in the morning sun. The long straight lines of each tall building were no longer blurred by the morning mists. One building higher than all the rest as like the tower of some Gothic palace, marvellously beautiful, thought Sylvia, with its stone-work touched by gold and its perpendicular windows reaching from earth to heaven.

"That's the Woolworth building," said Edward. "Built out of ten cent stores. It cost a million of money."

"Do people live there?" asked Sylvia breathlessly.

Edward laughed at her simple question.

"Quite a number! Offices on every floor. Typewriters rattling. Clerks passing up and down. The biggest bee-hive in the world. Human bees gathering in the yellow honey. First stop on the thirty-first floor, if you're in a hurry. Twenty-two more on top. I call it the House of a Thousand Windows."

Sylvia clutched his arm.

"Can't we go back to England?"

"You'll like New York," said Edward. "It's pretty good in Fifth Avenue."

The little tugs nosing round the *Olympic* pushed her into the dock between other great ships which looked squat and small underneath the skyscrapers. The sheds were far below the boat deck, and groups of people down there craned their necks to look up and waved handkerchiefs.

"There they are!" said Edward quietly.

"Who?"

"My father and mother. I expect they've been waiting two hours or more. Look! At the edge of that open shed."

"Well, it's nice to be met!" said Sylvia, and she waved her hand. She had felt un-English on her first arrival at Victoria station, that time she came to London. Now she felt as though she had come to a different world, like Mars or some distant planet. She was glad that somewhere down there were people who would understand her and be kind.

It was a long time before they could get down the gangway after passport examinations and all sorts of formalities. Piles of luggage already lay on the platforms of the open shed. The passengers seemed to forget all the friendships of the voyage as soon as they had left the ship, and some of the Americans were having a heated time with Customs officers. All the people who had come to meet them were penned behind a far barrier too distant for any conversation but that of smiles and waving hands. It was an hour before Edward and Sylvia followed their luggage to the other side of the barrier, after a Customs officer had searched for alcohol and expressed great suspicion as to Sylvia's clothes, which he seemed to think were newer and more costly than any lady ought to have. It was Edward who conducted the argument, with a patient self-control, which almost broke down once or twice with a cry of "Oh, hell!"

Then Sylvia found herself in the embrace of Mrs. Hillier.

"Welcome to our city!" said this lady with the white hair, whom Sylvia had met before in the restaurant of the Amirauté in Mentone on a gala night of Carnival. "We're

terribly glad to see you, my dear. . . . Edward's wife! . . . Isn't that wonderful! Grand Rapids is going to begrudge you three weeks in New York. And Daddy there is so excited I can hardly hold him."

Mr. Hillier senior, who had been wringing Edward's hand and patting his shoulder, now kissed Sylvia on both cheeks and laughed and took off his tortoise-shell rims and wiped them, and laughed again, and put them on, and gazed at her moist and shining eyes.

"If this isn't the most wonderful thing that's ever happened! And isn't Edward the luckiest young fellow in the United States? New York has got all its flags flying, and they're getting out the band at Grand Rapids. I'll tell the world! I certainly will!"

"Now Daddy," said Mrs. Hillier, "you keep all that nonsense talk until Sylvia is safe on the tenth floor of the Plaza. I'm sure the dear child is sickened of the United States already, after that struggle through the Customs. It makes a very poor impression on every foreigner, to say nothing of the bad language of hundred-per-cent Americans."

"I'm one of the hundred-per-cent Americans," said Sylvia. "All Edward's! But I didn't use bad language."

That little speech seemed to please Mr. and Mrs. Hillier. Mr. Hillier again announced his intention of "telling the world."

They had a six-cylinder Cadelac—at least Mr. Hillier said it was a six-cylinder, though Sylvia wouldn't have noticed if it had been only five—and it was this vehicle, driven by a chauffeur who said "Good-day, miss," in a friendly way, that the Hillier family, including Sylvia, surged into the traffic of New York, and by the grace of God and some skill on the part of the driver reached Fifth Avenue and the Plaza Hotel.

It was the elder Mr. Hillier who said "Fifth Avenue!" as though announcing the highway to Heaven, but Sylvia was too scared to pay much attention to detail. She was conscious only of the tides of motor traffic in which they were caught and borne forward like a straw in a storm at sea. Sometimes the tide stopped abruptly and there were moments

of tense silence followed by a great roar as squadrons of heavy cars leaped forward again at some mysterious signal. They dived under an overhead railway with iron pillars upon which a train passed with grinding wheels and a ringing bell. They seemed to be plunging down a long valley between high mountains, the tops of which she could not see from the closed Cadelac, although the valley was a street and the mountains were houses with innumerable windows.

"Down town," said Edward, "the business end of New York. That's where they juggle with the money which comes from the honest labour of Western farmers and factory hands."

"Now, Edward!" said his father. "No politics, and none of your revolutionary theories to-day, my boy."

That was before they came to Fifth Avenue, and when Sylvia sat holding her husband's hand in a tight clasp like a frightened child. Now and then, through the block of motor traffic, she had a glimpse of the people of New York. They were all streaming along the side walks at a great pace—crowds of young girls, neatly dressed, and each with a funny little hat over one eye; crowds of young men, clean-shaven, rather good-looking, though not so good-looking as Edward, with a strained, anxious look in their eyes, she thought.

"Why are they all hurrying?" she asked.

Edward Hillier laughed.

"It's a habit in New York. No need really! They have a lunch at a quick counter, gobble down their food, and then waste an hour. . . . Here's the Plaza! At last!"

To Sylvia the Plaza did not look like a hotel. It reminded her vaguely of Selfridge's Stores, with all its rooms placed one on top of the other until they reached the stars. She had a sense of being in a very rich and luxurious shop when she stood for a moment with Mr. and Mrs. Hillier in the reception hall, while Edward did some mysterious business at the desk with an important-looking official, rather like President Wilson. Perhaps it was President Wilson, she thought, though afterwards she learnt it was the reception clerk.

There were crowds of strangely-dressed people waiting about the hall and passages which stretched away to a great distance. Many of them were young girls in short fur cloaks and big snow boots unfastened at the top and falling over their indoor shoes. Some of them were studying a bookstall which seemed to display every book and magazine published in every language. Some of them were buying flowers at a stall gay with hot-house blooms. Behind plate-glass windows were wonderful pearl necklaces and diamond wrist-watches and bracelets and other trinkets.

"This is one of the best hotels in New York," said Mrs. Hillier. "I hope you won't find it uncomfortable after your homely old places in London."

"It's wonderful," said Sylvia, "but much too grand for me. Is there a room for lost property?"

"There certainly is," answered Mrs. Hillier, "but surely you haven't lost anything yet?"

"If ever I let go of Edward," said Sylvia, "I shall never find him again."

Mr. Hillier thought this a very good joke.

"If ever you lose Edward, you ask the nearest bell hop and say, 'I want my husband!'"

"Yes, but how shall I find a bell hop?" asked Sylvia; "I don't even known what it is."

"What a lot she has to learn, poor child!" cried Mrs. Hillier, laughing. "First of all we must teach her the American language."

Edward came back from the reception clerk and gave an anxious glance at Sylvia.

"You look tired," he said to her tenderly.

"It's all so big," said Sylvia. "I feel like a midget. Those sky-scrapers changed my mental perspective. . . . And I'm parched with thirst."

"It's the central heating," explained Edward. "It seems to dry one up until one gets used to it. That's why we drink so much iced water and spoil our complexions."

Mr. and Mrs. Hillier did not go up to their rooms with them.

"You two people want to be alone," said Mrs. Hillier in

her motherly way. "As though I didn't know! Now you have a quiet time for two hours and then we'll meet at tea and be greedy to hear all the things we're dying to know."

"What floor?" asked the young man in the place which Sylvia called a "lift" and her husband an "elevator."

"Ten," said Edward, and Sylvia thanked Heaven secretly that it wasn't a hundred, or worse. She noticed that the men took their hats off in the lift, although they had kept them on in the hall. They did it with an air of reverence, like entering a church, and she wondered why. On the tenth floor a lady sitting at a lonely desk at the end of a long corridor raised her head from a novel called "Main Street," smiled at Sylvia, and gave Edward a key attached to a long steel bar—"in case I get absent-minded and want to carry it away," said Edward. The number of their room was 1050, and this struck Sylvia as being so comical that she clung to Edward's arm and laughed with a touch of hysteria.

He opened a door of highly-polished wood which led into a little hall. Then he opened another door of white wood which led into a drawing-room furnished in the old English style with flowered chintzes on the chairs and a Chippendale cabinet, and a portrait of Lady Hamilton by Romney over the mantel-piece. There was another little door, leading into a bedroom with twin beds of light satin-wood, and chairs and tables to match. "Made in Grand Rapids," said Edward, not then but later. Still another door led into a spacious bath-room with white tiled walls and a white porcelain bath with a shower overhead and many china taps, and a glass rack for soaps, tooth-brushes and toilet articles.

"Any more doors?" asked Sylvia, gazing round. "Do we go into a billiard-room or anything like that?"

"It's not the best suite in the hotel," he told her, "but it's our little home for three weeks, and I'm hoping you like it."

"I feel like a fairy princess on the magic carpet," said Sylvia. "But I'm just a little afraid I may fall off and wake up with a nasty bump. It's so high up!"

She went to the window and looked down.

Fifth Avenue stretched away as far as she could see like an avenue of palaces. Over the roofs were great blocks of buildings like fortresses and cathedrals. Down below in the street an endless line of motor traffic swirled onwards and then stopped suddenly, and after a few moments streamed on again. They were motor-cars like toys from the height at which she saw them, and the people on the sidewalks were as tiny as ants—just like ants hurrying on mysterious purposes, directed by the spirit of their ant civilisation, tyrannous over their actions, dominating the instincts of the individual. How small they looked! And what a big ant-heap they had raised!

"Little old New York," said Edward, with his arms about her. "How does it strike you?"

"It's a knock-out blow!" answered Sylvia. "I've never seen anything like it. It's the queerest city in the world. It's alarming! All those people down there! . . . Edward! I don't believe I've an idea in common with them. I don't believe I understand their language. I feel a stranger in a far land—as strange as if I'd come to Mars."

"You'll find they're exactly like the people you've always known," he said, "with a slightly different accent. My father and mother don't alarm you, do they?"

"No, but perhaps there are not many like them. They've travelled in Europe."

"There are millions like them," he assured her with a whimsical smile. "They're just as typical as your English hedgerows. As for New York, after a day or two the strangeness wears off. One stops craning one's neck to look at the sky-scrapers. One finds that humanity on the sidewalk is about the same as anywhere else, with a few accidental differences. Some charming individuals in the crowd. Nice people. All trying to get the best out of life, and some of them helping to make it good."

"Well, I'm prepared to like them all," said Sylvia. "I'm an American citizen, and don't you forget it!"

Half an hour later she emerged from the bath-room with flushed cheeks.

"Edward!" she said in a low voice, "I believe I'm going to die!"

She really frightened him that time.

"For the love of Mike!" he cried, "what's the matter with you? . . . Sweetheart!"

"I feel suffocating. My throat is burning—and my hands."

"It's that darned central heating!" said Edward. He sprang towards a little wheel above some pipes and turned it rapidly.

"When I began to comb my hair," said Sylvia, "sparks flew out of it. Waves of electricity!"

She touched the handle of the bath-room door and gave a cry. "There it is again! Good heavens, I believe I shall go off bang!"

Edward laughed very heartily and reassured her, and himself.

"It's the electricity in the air of New York! It will make you feel as though you could jump as high as a sky-scraper!"

"I shall never get used to the United States," said Sylvia. But she had only been there for three quarters of an hour since leaving the Customs office.

XXIX

NEW YORK was so kind to Sylvia that it nearly killed her, according to its way with English visitors and to those whom it likes. But this process of benevolent murder is very pleasant and exciting to the victim, and in Sylvia's case it had the additional advantage of lulling the pangs of home-sickness. There was no time to feel home-sick, and she was too tired at night to yearn for her mother and Stephen and the friends in Europe, or to mourn over the death of that father who had been a good comrade to her in the last days of his life. The need of sleep became urgent towards the end of the three weeks. The people of New York, she decided, had been born without the need of sleep. Or perhaps it was the air of New York which gave them an almost inhuman vitality and endurance, so that they could spend half their nights in dancing after crowded days, and be perfectly fresh in the early hours of the morning.

There was certainly an intoxication in the air, caused by the electricity which Sylvia felt at the end of her finger tips and thrilling through every vein. She was aware of it most when she walked down Fifth Avenue with Edward after one of those late nights when she had been utterly exhausted in body and mind. The tired feeling passed from her. She tingled with the vitality of youth. The cold dry wind of early autumn blew the cobwebs out of her eyes, made them sparkle. The bright sunshine, giving a hard, sharp outline to the tall buildings under a cloudless blue sky was in wonderful contrast to the damp gloom of London, and yet was not like the sunshine of Europe as she had known it in Italy and France where its effect was languorous.

Always that morning stroll down Fifth Avenue restored her sense of well-being, and was like a strong tonic to nerves getting rather frayed by so much excitement. She found herself laughing again more than she ought to have done as a married lady. For two pins she would have gone dancing

down Fifth Avenue hand in hand with Edward. She laughed with a little cry of mirth when she caught sight of a florist's shop on which was the golden sign of *"Say it with Flowers!"*

"So that's where you found the idea!" she exclaimed, and when Edward wanted to know what idea she reminded him of all those floral tributes he had dumped into the little house in Montpelier Square.

She did not tire of Fifth Avenue with its great palaces of the millionaires which made the memory of Park Lane in London seem like a village street, and with its wonderful shops at the lower end displaying all the treasures of the world. It had a surprising beauty, a sense of greatness and splendour, yet the immensity of the buildings did not strike the imagination because of the relative sizes. St. Patrick's Cathedral, as large as Notre Dame, looked no bigger than a parish church.

It was curious how soon Sylvia became accustomed to the sky-scrapers, although she renewed her surprise, and to some extent her fear, when she went down town with Edward and found them towering up on each side of tunnel-like streets and could not look up to their top stories because of the dizziness she felt—could not look up anyhow, because of the surging crowds of business folk hurrying on every side of her. They went up to the top of the Woolworth building in that elevator that stopped first at the thirtieth floor, where Sylvia declared that her heart was in her mouth, and she marvelled at the richness of that "Cathedral of Commerce," as it was called, with its gilded decorations and polished marbles, in which was the ceaseless click of typewriters and the throb of busy life, until they stood in the open air of a gallery at the top of the fifty-third story and, hand in hand, looked down upon the whole city of New York, with the sea on one side and the river on the other. Fifth Avenue cut through it like a deep straight gorge, intersected by other streets, and buildings of enormous height seemed but little dwarfish blocks from this great tower.

"I feel like a goddess gazing down upon the little world

of men," said Sylvia. "How busy they all are down there, with their little work and worries! Look at them all, hurrying and scurrying about. What ridiculous mites they seem! And in each one's little brain is love and hate and greed and fear, and a sense of being very important in the scheme of things. Edward, my dear, you and I don't matter very much after all!"

He put his arm about her in one of the alcoves of the gallery where they could not be seen.

"We're enormously important to each other," he answered; "and the human soul reaches higher than the biggest sky-scraper—as high as Heaven, my dear."

Well, that was a restful moment, but there were not many like it. The day's work began before Sylvia was out of bed. It was when the telephone bell tinkled with an urgent summons, at least, as early as half-past eight.

It was Edwards who answered in his dressing-gown.

"Hullo? . . . Yes, Edward Hillier speaking. . . . Oh, good morning, Mrs. Cardew! A jolly party last night. . . . Are we engaged for Thursday dinner-time? . . . Well, that's very kind of you. I'm sure Sylvia would love it. I'll just take a look at our little book. Will you hold the line? . . . Sylvia, what about dinner with the Cardews? They want to take us to the Metropolitan Opera House. You'd like to see it. We can't leave New York without a night at the opera."

Sylvia had a head for figures. She knew that they had already accepted for two dinners on Thursday evening—or was it fourteen? Edward was getting rather tangled up with all these invitations. He had already made one or two fearful breaks by duplicating his engagements. It was partly the fault of his mother and father who had fixed up a wonderful programme in advance, not anticipating that all Edward's friends, old comrades in France mostly, would insist upon their prior claims. The telephone bell rang six times in thirty minutes. There were invitations to tea at the Ambassador, lunch at the Biltmore, dinner at the Russian Cabaret. A lady journalist desired to interview Sylvia on the subject, "Do Englishwomen love their husbands?"

Three photographers desired the honour of making studio portraits. Four of Edward's former college friends wanted to know why in hell he refused to have a drink with them. There was a long distance call from Grand Rapids with an invitation to dinner any night next month.

"If that telephone rings again, I shall scream," said Sylvia.

It rang again.

So the breakfast hour was interrupted. And yet Sylvia liked it best of all the day, because she was alone with Edward, and because it was amusing when a waiter in evening dress, looking as though he had never been to bed, brought in a complete kitchen of polished metal, and proceeded to lay out a banquet, beginning with grape fruit in powdered ice, going on from rolled oats and post toasties to fried flounder, eggs and ham, hot rolls, cold rolls, griddle cakes and buckwheat cakes, honey and jam, and, best of all, glasses of iced water which Sylvia drank before the coffee as though it were the elixir of life. And, indeed, without that iced water at frequent intervals, she was certain she would die because of that central heating in all the places to which she went, where the dry heat drew all the moisture out of her body and all the vitality out of her brain, until she felt mummified.

Luncheon began almost as soon as breakfast was over, after that walk down Fifth Avenue. Mr. and Mrs. Hillier who were staying at the Biltmore had generally arranged it, and their party was never less than eight, though sometimes it spread to fourteen. They were Mr. and Mrs. Hillier's relatives and friends, and Sylvia was trying to memorise their names and faces.

"I want you to know my cousin, Mrs. Harriet B. Shaw," said Mr. Hillier, and thereupon he would describe the exalted character of that lady and the business of her admirable husband.

"If it weren't for Harriet, this city of New York would fall down in a heap. Harriet saves it from the wrath of God by her good work among the children of the Bowery toughs. Now you know that's true, Harriet, so don't go pretend-

ing you're one of the world's worst women! That's her husband, Cousin Ted. Began life by tying up parcels at three dollars a week. Knows every knot you can make out of string. Now he owns the biggest line in shoe stores this side of Chicago. You've got to be careful of old Ted. When he goes on a party he gets young again. Oh, boy!"

"Sylvia, my darling, you'll be glad to know my old friend Judge Wilmerding. The biggest authority on law of real estate in this country, and might have been President of the United States if he hadn't been shy of politics. Well, I don't blame him. Judge, this is my little daughter-in-law. Fresh from England, as you can see by her rose-like bloom. We're terribly proud of her."

They were mostly middle-aged people, and Sylvia was touched by their kindness, because it seemed surprising that they should like to see her so much. They were always "delighted to see her," and although she came to know that as a conventional phrase, they seemed to mean what they said. Those middle-aged business men with silvered hair and square-cut faces and horn-rimmed spectacles were courteous and reverential during the rather lengthy introductions of Mr. Hillier, but afterwards they became a little jocular, and towards the end of each meal, intimate and confidential. They liked to tell the story of their lives, and their rise from small beginnings to considerable prosperity, not in any bragging way, but as a tale of adventure which might interest her. But it was difficult to keep her attention fixed on this long narrative from the gentleman on her right when another gentleman on her left was endeavouring to describe the beauties and importance of his home town, or the intricacies of the American Constitution, or the effect of Prohibition on the health and morals of the nation.

It was especially difficult because Mr. Hillier, desiring to keep the party merry and bright, and to exhibit her as a choice specimen of English womanhood—his son Edward's wife!—proposed many toasts in what he called "soft drinks," and desired her to tell the company what she thought of New York, and described with great gusto and some exaggeration the terrible Bohemianism of that gala

night in Mentone when he had first had the pleasure of meeting her.

"Those two dancing girls . . . Cæsar! It makes me blush to remember them."

"You remember them too vividly," said Mrs. Hillier. "I should forget them, if I were you, Daddy. And, anyhow, they're no worse than the girls of the Zigfield Follies."

The conversation over these luncheon tables, and over the dinner tables that followed them, invariably turned at times upon the troubles of Europe and the duty of the United States in regard to them. The middle-aged gentlemen asked Sylvia rather anxiously—as though she knew—whether she considered that Europe was "doomed," or whether she thought that England was "losing grip," or whether the British Empire was likely to "break up." They did not seem to believe her easy assurance that Europe was getting on quite nicely, as far as she could see, and that the British Empire had been breaking up for five hundred years and was still in the same condition. Occasionally they forgot that she was English, and discussed the mysteries of American politics in technical language which she could not understand, and analysed American conditions and characteristics with a self-criticism, and occasionally with a pessimism that surprised her.

Judge Wilmerding, for instance, deplored the lawlessness of the United States and the growing contempt for law in the minds of the masses. It did not surprise him, he said, considering that the people who ought to set a good example were violating the law every day by their contempt of Prohibition and by their corruption of justice. "A wealthy man in this country," he said, "can escape the penalty of every crime, including murder, if he has enough dollars to get away with it. It's my deliberate conviction that in spite of all our moral talk we're the most criminal country on the face of the earth. There are more murders in Chicago in one week than in the whole of England for a year."

It was clear that they were all uneasy about the future of the United States. They talked gloomily of the industrial situation and the increase of Bolshevism. Some of them,

especially some of the middle-aged women, were passionate advocates of the League of Nations, and confessed that, in their opinion, the United States had let down the world when they repudiated Wilson and all his work.

Mrs. Hillier interrupted these philosophical discussions by her good-natured laugh.

"My daughter-in-law is too young for all this serious talk, and I don't think it's good to let her see too soon how much we're beginning to criticise ourselves. I'm one of the old-fashioned people who believe that America is all right —God's own country! We may have our little faults, just at the heart of us we're still sound and good. So there!"

"That's fine," said Mr. Hillier. "I like to hear you say that, Mother! Whatever's wrong with New York—and I can't see much—the Middle West stands for the cleanest civilisation in the world."

It was Mrs. Hillier who introduced the element of youth.

"We mustn't surround Sylvia with old fogies like ourselves," she said.

She brought along the younger married set, and quite a number of college boys and girls, the sons and daughters of the middle-aged friends. Sylvia found them more alarming than the older folk and less easy to talk to. The young girls were wonderfully self-possessed, and their eyes were critical of her frocks and the way she wore her hair, and they exchanged little smiling glances at her ignorance of American habits and were openly amused by her foreign accent.

And yet they were very friendly and bright, and quick to exchange confidences if there were any chance of private conversation. They liked Sylvia's "cute" little hats. They were "crazy" about her wrist-watch. Did she go to college before she met Edward Hillier? How did American husbands compare with English boys? They had heard she was related to half the English aristocracy. Had she ever been to Court? It must be wonderful to wear ostrich feathers and a long train! Was it true the Prince of Wales had married a girl on the sly? Was it true that English girls were rather immoral, according to things one read

about them in the papers? Or that English men were drinking too much since the war? . . . Well, if that wasn't true they didn't know what to believe! Some of the college boys in America carried flasks on their hips. She would find out things presently. . . . But it must be wonderful to be married, especially to such a nice boy as Edward Hillier. They hoped she would get to like the United States. Of course they didn't go in for kings and queens, and court ceremonies, and haunted houses, and old world romance, but she'd find life rather bright. The boys would give her a good time. But it was a pity she couldn't live in New York. Grand Rapids must be next door to Main Street.

Sylvia felt older than these girls of her own age. They were sophisticated and yet simple. They seemed to know a lot about college boys and the latest fiction and newspaper scandals and life at Palm Beach and Long Island, but Europe meant nothing to most of them, except as a place to which their fathers and mothers went for holidays from which they returned with amusing stories about the old-fashioned ways in England and France, the badness of hotels, the lack of central heating, the dishonesty of French shopkeepers, the desolation of the battlefields, the price of frocks in Paris, the unhygienic conditions of Italy, and the political troubles of nations who were blinded to common sense by inherited hatreds.

America was big enough for them. New York held all that life meant, in dances, jazz bands, the latest movies, and the cute little frocks in which they arrayed themselves so prettily, with a touch of the lip stick and artificial complexions. That was Sylvia's first impression, though afterwards she came to know certain types of American girls and found some more serious than she could ever be, and others with a sense of humour and a jolly tolerance of mind which made her friends with them.

Edward gave her many warnings on one point which seemed obvious enough.

New York isn't America, Sylvia. Don't judge us alto-

gether from what you see here. This is a cosmopolitan city in touch with Europe."

"I'm not judging you at all," she said. "Who am I to judge? I'm watching and learning."

"What have you learnt already?" he asked, smiling at her, and anxious for her first impressions.

"I've learnt that Prohibition is a farce in well-to-do New York; that chicken gumbo is the best soup in the world; that the darkey waiters have very kind eyes; that one can laugh as loudly as one likes at a party after the first cocktail, and that a young married woman is regarded with a kind of tender reverence by middle-class folk who hope she won't be naughty. I've learnt that the United States aren't sure of themselves; that they think Europe is beyond all hope; that there's one motor-car to every nine people, including babies in arms and imbeciles. I've learnt that the whole population of the world can be put into the state of Montana and not feel crowded. At least that's what I'm told, though I don't believe it."

"It's true," said Edward, "but what else?"

He was hungry for something kinder than that.

"I've learnt that an American husband is a nice lover, and that Grand Rapids is next door to Main Street—and that so far I'm happy, but tired."

Well, he had to be satisfied with that, and it wasn't so bad. He was proud of Sylvia, more and more in love with her. Everyone envied him, congratulated him, said, "That little wife of yours is wonderful!" All eyes were upon her when they went together into a hotel restaurant or to an evening party assembled in her honour and his. She was like a fairy princess in those evening frocks of hers. Her laughing eyes captivated the men. They crowded round her. She had a frank, easy, gracious way, in spite of her shyness, unlike some English girls who froze one stiff by their coldness and haughtiness. His mother had fallen in love with her and that was the best tribute of all, for his mother had high standards and shrewd eyes. His father, of course, had been captured at once. And, so far, she had not pined for her own family, or for Europe. She was

not beginning to feel exiled. He believed she was liking America.

To please her—he would do anything in the world to please her—he took tickets for the Belgian poet's lecture at Carnegie Hall, and before the lecture went round to the stage door, and to a little waiting-room behind the platform, to wish him luck. His high white forehead was beaded with moisture, and he plucked his soft brown beard with nervous hands and was in a pitiable state of nervousness. He spoke rapid French to Sylvia and implored her to pray for him, because he felt that his knees would undoubtedly give way on the walk from the curtain to the reading desk on a platform which seemed as large to him as the field of Waterloo. They left him trembling in every limb, looking "as cheap as two cents," said Edward, and took their places in the auditorium of a hall with many galleries, packed with a great audience. All the people in the stalls were in evening clothes, and diamonds sparkled in the women's hair and round their necks and wrists. Thousands of those silver-haired, clean-shaven business men, exactly like those whom Sylvia had met on the *Olympic* and in Mr. Hillier's luncheon parties, sat behind white shirt fronts with grave, inscrutable faces.

Sylvia was surprised. "What have all these people come to hear?" she asked. "Surely they haven't read the poems of our high-souled poet! Do they all speak French?"

Edward was amused.

"Most of the men are here for the same reason as myself. To please their wives! And the ladies are here because they know that this bearded Belgian is very famous in Europe, and because they remember what Belgium did in the war, and because, anyhow, they devote one night a week to high-brow stuff in the Carnegie Hall. They're subscribers to a lecture society, and want to get their money's worth. . . . Well, it's better than playing poker or drinking home brew."

When the poet appeared on the platform he stumbled over an imaginary pin, like Charlie Chaplin, and looked so frightened that he had to hold on to the reading desk for

support. Some people in the gallery laughed, but in the stalls the whole audience rose as a mark of respect to a great poet, and a tribute to Belgium. Slightly comforted, the poet began to speak in a rapid torrent of broken English on the subject of "The soul of Belgium," illustrated by his own poems which he delivered in French, in a shrill squeaky voice. Beyond the front six rows of the stalls it was impossible for any one to hear him. One or two voices from the gallery cried "Speak up!" and were immediately hushed with great indignation by the rest of the audience. Some of the silver-headed men slept quietly and soundly, as Sylvia noticed, with some excitement as a revelation of a great mystery. So that was when the people of New York indulged in a little slumber. It explained things. But the women clapped their white-gloved hands after each poem, and at the end of the lecture crowded up to the platform to shake hands with the poet and to say nice things about his lecture.

"You've given us a wonderful evening!" . . . "It's a great message of love and beauty." . . . "I'm perfectly crazy about those verses of yours!" . . . "I was in Belgium during the war and you brought it all back to me." . . . "I don't understand a word of French, but I just loved the sound of it."

The poet had great difficulty in getting off the platform. He bowed profoundly and backed to a little door, but it was locked. For a moment he hesitated, and then came back and bowed again, and tried another little door, which refused to yield. Once more he came back and bowed. *Cré Nom!* The third door was locked! He looked like a mouse in a trap. He would never escape from that terrible platform with many little doors. It was like a mightmare. He made a dash at another, and went through like a harlequin, followed by a roar of laughter from the gallery which had been watching his dilemma as the one bright spot in a dull evening.

"Well," said Sylvia, "I must say the people of New York are the kindest in the world to foreign lecturers! I'm certain they didn't understand a word he said. His broken English was barbarous and his French inaudible. Even I

didn't catch more than one word in ten. What do they get out of it?"

"They've seen the little man," said Edward. "He's in their gallery of famous portraits. Some of them will get his autograph and they'll talk about his lecture over the tea-tables and put it over those who didn't go. . . . And they like to be kind to lecturers from Europe. We call them the Bread Line. It's like feeding the starving children. It makes us feel good."

"I call it generous," said Sylvia. "I must say New York makes a hobby of hospitality."

Almost too much, she found, especially at her last party before leaving New York. Mr. and Mrs. Hillier had already gone to Grand Rapids to prepare Sylvia's future home and put the finishing touches to its interior decoration. It was going to be a wonderful little home, according to Mr. Hillier, in the best residential district, furnished in the finest style from the factory, with every labour-saving contrivance, and four bath-rooms.

"Why four?" Sylvia asked. "Edward and I can't possibly use more than one each, and that's unnecessary."

"You'll be having visitors," said Mr. Hillier. "Your mother and young Stephen among them, as sure as fate. And Edward's friends. And later on perhaps there'll be some little Hilliers who would like a tub now and then."

Sylvia had laughed at that, and did not pursue the subject. It was looking too far ahead.

The last party was given by one of Edward's old comrades in France, lately married. They were all the younger set, with a few extra bachelors and unmarried ladies. It happened in a very handsome apartment on Park Avenue, a dollar's taxi drive from the Plaza Hotel, and the noise of its merriment was already loud when the Italian elevator boy pushed the electric button at a door on the sixth floor. The door was opened by Major Birchall, a tall, dark, handsome young man with humorous eyes.

"Come right in! This party is getting together in great style. Ted, it seems a thousand years since you and I met at Château Thierry on a hot day! Mrs. Hillier, I'm very

proud to know you. Your husband and I were comrades in arms and we know the worst about each other. Everybody's dying to meet you."

They were a charming and merry crowd, thought Sylvia, and they were certainly getting together over cocktails which a young man was ladling out of a silver bowl into attractive-looking glasses.

"A little cocktail, Mrs. Hillier?" said Major Birchall. "Perfectly harmless, and rather pleasant."

Sylvia glanced at Edward. He had warned her about cocktails and never touched them himself. But she was thirsty, as usual, and the room was excessively hot. She accepted one of the attractive-looking glasses.

Major Birchall introduced her all round. Mrs. Arkwright, Mr. Arkwright, of Greenwich, Connecticut. Mrs. Robert L. Hatch, of Boundbrook, New Jersey. Mrs. Edith Crossley of New Rochelle, Mr. Crossley, known as Red Bob, because of his hair. Mrs. Katherine Tomlinson, of Sixth Avenue. Miss Elizabeth Clark, and others.

They were all very beautiful ladies, thought Sylvia, and rather expensive in their style of dress. One of them wore a Russian head-dress embroidered with pearls. They had the gift of laughter, and did not restrain it. Most of the men seemed to have been at college together—Yale, judging from their conversation. Most of the ladies moved in the same social set of New York City. They all knew Europe, and loved it. They knew more about London society than Sylvia, who knew very little, and they talked of books and plays and pictures and personalities in a bright vivacious way which became brighter and more vivacious as the attractive little glasses passed round a second time.

Sylvia found her first sip of that amber-coloured liquid most refreshing. It took away that tired feeling. She felt life pulsing from her hair to her finger tips. There was a jolly little flame inside her. She accepted the second invitation to that *elixir vitæ*. Edward was deep in talk with Red Bob who seemed to be rather pro-German after a visit to the Ruhr.

"What do you think of New York?" asked a young man with hair of crinkled gold and a boyish face.

"Marvellous!" said Sylvia, sipping that adorable liquid and feeling the flame burn brighter. "Everybody's so kind."

"They would be—to you," said the boy. "New York can be as cruel as hell if you haven't anything it wants to buy. I'm an unsuccessful painter—so I know."

That confession warmed Sylvia's heart to him. She thought of Stephen. Soon they were exchanging views on the old Masters. The boy had a passion for Franz Hals; he had made a pilgrimage to Haarlem. He was the greatest portrait painter who ever lived.

"You must paint my portrait one day," said Sylvia. "I will get Edward to commission one."

Under the spell of that amber-coloured liquid she felt very generous and kind.

"I couldn't do you justice," said the boy; "but I would have a darned good try. I'd just love to. How long are you going to be in New York?"

"Twelve hours more," said Sylvia. "To-morrow I go to Grand Rapids."

"Gosh!" said the boy, as though she were going to some very wild place where she might be in great danger. "If I were you, I wouldn't," he suggested later.

"That's going to be my home town," said Sylvia, who had learnt that phrase. "That's where my husband is very popular."

"You ask him to sell out and take up life in New York," said the boy with hair like crinkled gold. "I'd rather be dead than live in Grand Rapids. It's the back of beyond. How do you keep so gay with that place waiting for you?"

"You're trying to scare me," said Sylvia. But she felt wonderfully cheerful at the idea of Grand Rapids, exceedingly amused with this party, charmed with life in the United States. Everybody was so kind to her. And this good-looking boy was very amusing. And somebody was singing a French song in a beautiful soprano voice. It was Mrs. Katherine Tomlinson, who looked like one of Helleu's etch-

ings. She sang "Un Peu d'Amour" with the right amount of emotion, and was rewarded by rounds of applause.

"Mrs. Hillier, I'm sure you sing," said Major Birchall presently. "There's a lady here who can play like an archangel. She would like to accompany you."

Sylvia raised her eyebrows in question to Edward. He smiled over at her and nodded.

"One of your Italian songs," he suggested.

She sang one of Carmen's songs, and received an ovation.

"That's perfectly wonderful!" said the boy with the crinkled gold hair. "Better than Galli Curci. And you're going to waste that on Grand Rapids. It's a crime."

"This is a wonderful treat," said Major Birchall. "We had no idea. . . . Please sing something else, Mrs. Hillier."

The ladies were equally enthusiastic. Sylvia was pleased to give them pleasure. She felt that she could have sung the roof off the Albert Hall. It was the effect of that magic little drink in the attractive glasses. After two more songs Major Birchall brought her another little glass.

"Perfectly harmless," he said.

Sylvia was thirsty again. The heat of the room was really terrible. And that tired feeling was beginning to creep up from her feet.

She raised the little glass and smiled at Major Birchall. Here's to Anglo-American friendship!" she said.

"God bless England!" said the Major very heartily. "I'm all for a League of Nations between our two countries. That will secure the peace of the world."

He spoke solemnly and became confidential as he sat next to Sylvia with a glass of whiskey which he called a "highball" on the little table by his side.

"Mrs. Hillier," he said, "it's fine to see an English girl married to an American. I'd like to see millions of marriages between the United States and Great Britain. The old Anglo-Saxon stock is getting submerged in this country by every kind of Wap, Squarehead and Bohunk. It's a tragedy."

Sylvia thought it a joke. She laughed until the tears came into her eyes at those queer names.

"I'll never understand the American language," she protested.

Presently she had a feeling that she didn't understand her own language. Something funny was happening inside her head. Also something very queer was happening to her feet which seemed very far away. All the conversation in the room which had seemed very loud before became blurred to a vague murmur, like the roar of the sea in a shell. The palms of her hands were moist. She felt faint and dizzy.

Edward came over to her, and she was vaguely conscious of his anxious face.

"Aren't you feeling well?"

Yes, she heard those words as though they had been spoken down a long tunnel. Then all was silence.

"God damn it," said Edward with incredible violence, "Who in hell has been giving my wife those cursed cocktails?"

It was a most unfortunate ending to a jolly party. Sylvia felt very sorry for herself when she sat with her head on Edward's shoulder in a yellow taxi-cab on the way to the Plaza Hotel. She believed she was going to die. Once she believed she was dead. That was when Edward had carried her on to her bed in suite 1050. She lay senseless until she heard a voice say, "Nothing to worry about. Not wood alcohol this time!"

It was a doctor for whom Edward had telephoned in a panic. . . . She was very ill that night, and Edward knelt by her bedside, kissing her hand and calling her "Honey," and looking more frightened than she had ever seen him.

But she was well enough next day to take the train to Detroit on the way to Grand Rapids.

XXX

SYLVIA was very much ashamed of herself after that dreadful incident at the party. "It's a warning to me!" she said, for the twentieth time, when she sat with Edward in the sleeping car of the Detroit Express. Two darkey porters—whom Edward called red caps—had carried their luggage through the cathedral-like hall of the Pennsylvania station, and a darkey Pullman porter had arranged them comfortably in two drawing-room chairs which swung round towards the window, so that they would turn their backs on the other passengers and be perfectly private while they watched the scenery.

Edward was still hot with anger at Major Birchall for inviting her to take more than one cocktail, or even one. Probably it was some poisonous home-brew.

"That sort of thing is going to ruin the United States," said Edward. "To think that such a thing could happen in a perfectly good party on Park Avenue among my own friends! It makes one despair of American civilisation."

Sylvia, feeling better, did not take the matter so seriously. She said it wasn't a slur on American civilisation, because it might have happened in Paris or London, but a blot on the moral fame of a newly-married wife who ought to have had more sense in her head. She satisfied Edward on the score of health by making an excellent meal of tomato soup —pronounced tomayto she noticed in America—steak and tomatoes, potatoes called "French fried," followed by deep dish pie. Obviously she had not been poisoned. Edward horrified her sense of tradition by drinking a large cup of coffee with his meat which he explained was an American habit, especially on railroad journeys. Lest she might be bored he had provided a library of light literature which became ankle-deep round her swing chair. It included the *Saturday Evening Post, Good Housekeeping,* and the *Cosmopolitan, Arts and Decorations, The Spur,* the *Literary*

Digest, the *World's Work,* and the latest novels of Joseph Hergesheimer, Rex Beach, and Blasco Ibanez.

"Do you always travel with a circulating library?" asked Sylvia, and Edward confessed that he made do, as a rule, with the *Literary Digest* and the *New York Times.* Before he had the happiness of having a wife with him he usually sat in the smoking-car listening to the general conversation.

"It's a pity you can't spend an hour or two there," he said. "You'd learn more about the United States and the character of its average citizens, and the state of business, and the political opinions of the moment, than in any other gathering."

Sylvia touched a brass-bound pot with the point of her toe and demanded to know its use. There was one to every pair of swing chairs.

"We call it a cuspidor," said Edward. "It's a thing to spit in, but the custom's dying out, except in the smoking-room, where there are still a few distinguished exponents of an ancient art."

"I'm glad to know," said Sylvia.

She fell asleep in her swing chair and Edward watched her, and thought how beautiful she was, and how good God had been to him. He hoped she would like that little house in Grand Rapids. His father and mother had spared no expense to make it pretty. He was rather anxious about some of his friends there, and especially about Mrs. Sturge, the leader of society in that city, and commonly known as the "Grand Rapid," because of her distinguished manner, great wealth, and swiftness of judgment. She could make things very unpleasant for anybody whom she didn't happen to like. . . . Well, she was bound to like Sylvia. . . . Then there was that woman, Julia Trumbull Shibley. She wrote decadent novels and was rather a dangerous lady in more ways than one. She had been in France during the war and come back with queer views on things. She had also made love to Edward and scared him terribly. Tried to vamp him! He would warn Sylvia about her.

He gave her this warning and various other character sketches of the leading citizens of Grand Rapids when she

was awake again, and it passed the time rather happily because Sylvia seemed amused.

"It all sounds very interesting," she said. "I'll do my best to love everybody, not too well but wisely. And never again will I betrayed into the cocktail habit. Tell me about the furniture factory."

He told her at great length. He described the various processes, the different kinds of wood—from every part of the world—the delicate machinery which his father had installed, the foreign workmen—a good many Swedes who did the carving, polishing, and finishing, the artists who did the designing.

"Artists in Grand Rapids!" exclaimed Sylvia. "That sounds thrilling. Tell me about them."

He told her about them. They weren't great artists perhaps, but they could adapt all the classical designs very tastefully, and work out new notions in the American style and suit the taste of the moment by anticipating it six months ahead. There was a young Frenchman named Vauban who was worth his weight in gold.

"Well, that's good news," said Sylvia. "I shall be able to keep up my French."

Edward was rather doubtful about that. Vauban was a perfectly good boy—rather neurotic in his type, perhaps—but they didn't ask him to the house much. He was only earning fifty dollars a week.

"But I thought you said he was worth his weight in gold?" said Sylvia.

"Yes, but we don't pay him by weight," said Edward laughing. "It doesn't do to spoil the market or let these boys get above themselves."

They had an argument about that. Sylvia expressed some rather revolutionary sentiments of which Edward did not altogether approve, although he was very liberal, he said. As an employer of labour he didn't believe in giving more than the market price which, in the United States, was already too high.

They had another little argument about the Pullman porter, that darkey with grizzled hair who looked after their

comfort in the swing chairs, and brushed Edward's coat every time he went to the restaurant or the smoking-car, and even polished his boots and Sylvia's with a soft cloth if they showed any sign of dust. Sylvia asked him if he had a coal black mammy, and whether he loved her as much as the songs said. It seemed to touch the man's heart, and he spoke of his old mother with such emotion that Sylvia was ashamed of her question, which she had asked in a spirit of humour. She questioned him about his home life, and was so conversational that Edward became restless. When the man had gone up the corridor he spoke to her.

"You mustn't get too friendly with those coloured boys. Give them an inch and they take all hell. It's a delicate question on this side."

"I feel so sorry for them," said Sylvia, "and I think they have such fine faces and kind eyes. I'd like to be kind to them."

"Our coloured problem is the worst thing we have," said Edward. "Your Indian question is nothing to it. The Punjab isn't in the heart of England."

That reference to the Punjab made Sylvia rather pensive. Her eyes filled with tears at the thought of her father, and Edward wanted to bite off his tongue for having reminded her of that grief. But in five minutes he had her laughing again. She was like her mother in that way. The exciting part of the journey for Sylvia was when the coloured man prepared the beds, letting down the bunks, smoothing the sheets with his brown hands, arranging the green curtains.

"Good heavens!" cried Sylvia. "Am I expected to sleep in one of those litle cubby-holes?"

"You certainly are," said Edward laughing, "and I hope you'll sleep like a top!"

"How am I going to undress?" asked Sylvia. "It's impossible. Besides it's indecent."

"Perfectly simple," explained Edward. "You shut the green curtains, do up the big buttons, and there you are in complete privacy and all the comfort of life. Turn that switch on and there's your reading-lamp. All the women at one end, all the men at the other. You put your boots out-

side the curtain and the porter rubs them up for you. Be careful to remember your own bunk. It's awkward otherwise."

"It's like a French farce," said Sylvia. She was highly amused by the whole idea and almost shocked Edward by her levity of speech. But that night she suffered tortures. She started badly by getting cramp in her right leg in the endeavour to undress with grace and dignity. She went on to worse trouble by finding the heat of her "cubby-hole" unbearable and suffocating. For hours she lay awake with a parched and burning throat, and when at last she fell asleep she had a hideous nightmare in which she imagined that the Pullman porter was strangling her with her own bootlaces. She cried out, and woke up, and was horror-struck to see a brown hand through the aperture of her green curtain. She was about to shriek when she saw the hand was carefully fastening up the big button which kept the curtain together and which she had undone in the hopeless quest for air.

It was an hour before she dozed again after shuddering at the noise of the grinding wheels, at the sudden shocks when they stopped at a station, at the clanging of great bells from other engines. During that night of horror she deplored her marriage with Edward. She had been a little fool to leave Europe on this terrible adventure. Grand Rapids assumed a hideous prospect. It was probably a frightful place, remote from civilisation, and inhabited by unpleasant people whom she would hate like poison.

Once, for some reason, she thought of Neville Lacey. It comforted her a little to think that he was on the same continent, in Canada. If anything happened—anything horrible, or if life became unbearable, she would send him an S.O.S. She had arranged that with him half in jest, and he had vowed that he would come to her anywhere in the world through fire or water, flood or famine, if ever she needed his friendly aid. Well, she wanted him now. If only he would bring her a glass of iced water and break all the windows in that overheated train. . . .

She told Edward of her nightmare in the morning, but left out the part about Neville which was rather silly. He

was alarmed by the pallor of her face and the dark lines under her eyes. He had slept perfectly, and had a very good shave in the smoking-car which also contained the metal wash-basins, polished like silver, and liquid soap and every arrangement for a leisurely toilet.

Sylvia recovered at the breakfast-table, but thanked heaven she would not have to spend a second night on an American train.

"To-night," said Edward with some emotion and a wonderful light in his eyes, "we shall be in our own little home."

XXXI

IT was a wonderful little home in Grand Rapids which had been provided for Mr. and Mrs. Edward Hillier, junior, by Mr. and Mrs. Edward Hillier, senior. It was in the residential section, well away from the furniture factories and the apartment blocks in which the factory folk—Germans, Swedes, Scandinavians and other nationalities—were very adequately housed. A large amount of wealth and a considerable amount of artistic taste had gone to the making of the residential section. Every style of ancient architecture adapted to modern American notions was represented in this quarter of the town, where the leading business men and their wives had competed with each other in producing the ideal home.

There was the old Colonial style with its open verandah and white pillars, and the Tudor style with black beams and white plaster looking as if it had been there for centuries, and the perfectly good American twentieth century shingled house, and red brick houses with pointed gables, and Indiana limestone houses with tiled roofs.

Mrs. Sturge, sometimes known as the "Grand Rapid" by unkind critics, had defiled all competition by her new house in the style of a French château finished in chalk-white stucco and limestone, with a great entrance hall, and a window of fourteenth century stained glass, and a high gallery of carved oak and Spanish chestnut lighted with hand-wrought iron lanterns. She had furnished it throughout according to the period of the French renaissance, made rather more comfortable, and with occasional lapses into modern periods, especially in the bath-rooms.

Sylvia's new home was not so grand as all that, but it was a large-sized house standing alone—at least a hundred yards from the Trumbull Shibleys' on the other side—and built of red brick and creosote-stained shingles. Mr. Hillier, senior, had devoted much time and a rich enthusiasm

to its interior decoration, and all its furniture had been produced in his own factories. He was proud of it, and made no secret of his pride and joy when he led Sylvia round and pointed out all the details by which he had contrived to make her new home the cosiest little house in Grand Rapids.

"It's not grand," he said. "but it's a real American home snuggled into its proper environment and filled to the roof with all sorts of comforts and conveniences."

The drawing-room furniture was of an eighteenth century design covered with brocades of an antique pattern. The dining-room was Jacobean. The best bedroom was in the Early American style with Ives Wings chairs, a Salem bed, American Hepplewhite dressing-table, and a Plymouth cupboard—reproduced in the factories from old models. Edward's study, or library, or whatever he liked to call it—"I expect you will sit there a good deal," said Mr. Hillier—had a polished hardwood floor and walls panelled in light oak, and was simply furnished with old Washington chairs and walnut bookcases. There was an open fire-place with steel and irons, and an electric fire made to look like burning logs, although, of course, there was the usual central heating.

The four bath-rooms were in white tiles with porcelain baths and many little fixtures built into the walls.

"I believe in bath-room luxury," said Mr. Hillier; "it's America's message to the world, the distinctive note of our civilisation. By their bath-rooms ye shall know them."

There was one little surprise which he kept to the last. It was a spacious half timber garage in which, ready for use, stood a Chrysler Six, a wedding present for Edward and his wife from their loving father and mother.

"A pretty good car," said Mr. Hillier, who was an enthusiast. "No vibration, lots of power—don't you let Edward drive too fast!—smooth and sweet. I hope you'll have some pleasant times in it."

Well, there was Sylvia's home in Grand Rapids. "The Home of Heart's Desire," as she told Edward with a little break in her voice. She also told him that she didn't deserve

it, and she felt frightened at being a married woman with a house of her own, and that she hoped she would make him happy but rather doubted it owing to her peculiar character—which was terribly European—and her inherited tendencies which would probably lead her into trouble. All of which caused Edward to get eloquent and absurdly sentimental, as anybody might expect, in his early married state.

It was on their first evening in the new home when they wandered through its rooms again, hand in hand, while two Swedish maids prepared dinner, that Edward spoke very gravely and tenderly about their future life.

"I want you to know that I don't take back a word of anything I promised that night I asked you to be my wife. I renew my vows on this first night in our little home! My purpose in life is to make you happy, to obey your slightest wish, to serve you truly. And after that I want to pay back my debt to Europe—they've given me you!—by any kind of service that an insignificant American citizen can do in his own home town."

"What do you mean by that exactly," asked Sylvia, rather abashed by this solemnity of talk.

"Well," he said, "I'm not going to forget the things I've seen in Europe, those years of sacrifice in the war and those years of misery afterwards. I'm not going to let my people forget as far as I can keep on reminding them. They've wiped it out of their minds too much. They're beginning to sink back too deeply in self-satisfaction and prosperity. I want the United States to do something big in the way of world reconstruction, big and generous, and self-sacrificing. And above all I want to work in a small way for Anglo-American friendship."

"Are you going to stand for the Presidency or anything like that?" asked Sylvia.

Edward answered her mockery with his grave smile.

"Not just yet! But if every individual American does a bit of propaganda in his own home town he can help to shape public opinion. I think of joining the Rotary Club. They may give me a chance to speak now and then. I'd

like to tell them what I think of England, and keep on telling them."

"They'll think you're prejudiced," said Sylvia. "They'll know I'm using undue influence. British propaganda!"

"We want more of it," he answered.

He was certainly a very noble young man, with high and exhaulted ideals. Sylvia wished sometimes that he was not quite so noble. It was so difficult to live up to his standards. There were times when she yearned for the flippancy of Neville Lacey, who hid any serious thought he might have under light-hearted mockery, who never spoke in terms of idealism, and then only as a good jest.

The Americans were great idealists. It seemed to her before many months had passed in Grand Rapids that she was being suffocated with idealism. Perhaps it was because she was an English girl and a newcomer to the United States that she heard so much of it. Grand Rapids was fairly buzzing with idealism, and gradually—indeed rapidly—she was being drawn into many branches of social uplift. She was invited to give an address at the Women's Country Club on the spiritual message of English art, or, failing that, on Joan of Arc, as saint and heroine. In a weak moment, and to please Edward, she agreed to give the discourse on Joan and made such a triumphant success of it, thanks to Chambers' *Encyclopædia* and Andrew Lang's *Life,* and some highly imaginative work of her own, that she was immediately requested to talk at Miss Mason's Academy for Young Ladies on the Italian Primitives and their message of Beauty.

This being reported in the local Press, she received invitations from the Women's College at Jackson and the Literary circle at Ann Arbour. At the request of Mrs. Sturge, who, as the leading lady of Grand Rapids and the protectress of the younger married set, could not be denied without serious social disadvantages, she joined the American Red Cross, and the local branch of a society for the Suppression of Cigarette Smoking among Young Girls. She became a vice-president of a summer camp for girls, for the Promotion of Moral Character Building, and associate members of a society for the Advancement of a World Court of Justice.

She also subscribed, with Edward's money, to an anti-luxury league, to a course of educational lectures on the Progress of Civilisation in Europe, and to a Mission for International Peace and Good-will based upon Disarmament and the Freedom of the Seas.

Mrs. Sturge welcomed her graciously as a great acquisition to the intellectual set of Grand Rapids, and made her known to the best people in a series of dinner parties given in honour of Edward and Sylvia. "To meet Mr. and Mrs. Edward P. Hillier, junior, on their return from Europe," was how her invitations were worded, as Sylvia learnt from Miss Julia Trumbull Shibley, who had not had the honour of one of these invitations, being in Mrs. Sturge's bad books, but who had seen one on the mantel-piece at Mrs. Julius Schmidt's.

They were rather grand and formal dinner parties and frightening to Sylvia, who was tempted to wreck them at times by outbursts of levity.

Some of the other guests confined to Sylvia privately that they also felt overwhelmed by the gravity and dignity of these parties, and could hardly live up to the lofty morality and high-brow culture of Mrs. Sturge. Everything was very expensive, from the Venetian glasses to the gold dessert plates. The guests were announced by a footman imported from England. They were the wealthiest and most virtuous members of Grand Rapids society—at least, as the bank manager said with a touch of humour, they hadn't been found out yet—mostly middle-aged, but with one or two couples belonging to the younger married set "to brighten us up," as Mrs. Sturge explained in her gracious way.

She bore a remarkable resemblance to the late Queen Victoria, of somewhat larger and more opulent build, and she undoubtedly possessed the virtue of that queen and mother and the same intellectual energy devoted to moral works. Since the death of her husband, who had made a great deal of money out of real estate in Grand Rapids and Detroit, she had travelled extensively in Europe and had brought back many treasures of art, including a famous portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds and two Van Dycks—formerly in the

possession of a noble but impoverished English family—and a considerable collection of Italian primitives alleged to be genuine by the dealer from whom she had bought them, but rather doubtful in the opinion of an art critic from New York who had been very impertinent.

Sylvia observed a certain etiquette at Mrs. Sturge's dinner parties into which the company fell as though by common consent. Nobody presumed to interrupt Mrs. Sturge while she was speaking, or to hold converse with his neighbour even in undertones. It was Mrs. Sturge who chose the subject of conversation and led it with an air of authority, though she graciously called upon this gentleman or that lady to contribute to the discussion. It was kept upon a high level, and ranged from the foreign policy of the United States to the political situation in Europe, and from the progress of culture in Grand Rapids to the decadence of the younger generation in New York and other great cities.

Occasionally Mrs. Sturge allowed herself to deal with less austere topics, and gave her weighty opinions on the latest screen picture or the last novel by her favourite author, who was Alexander Black. As an ardent Prohibitionist she allowed no alcoholic drink in her house, and was exceedingly angry with any of her friends who confessed to the delights of home brew or illicit relations with local bootleggers.

It was this austerity of temperature which seemed to be most trying to some of her guests, and it was on that subject that they made intimate revelations to Sylvia, as, for instance, when the vice-President of the Guaranty Trust held a whispered conversation with her in the drawing-room when he had joined the ladies.

"A wonderful old lady!" he said, with a smiling glance at his hostess, "and of course we're all very proud of her as our guiding light, but I confess I find her dry evenings a severe strain at the back of the throat. I'd give a hundred dollars for a highball and think it cheap."

He put his hand across his lips as though they were parched, and made a little clucking noise with his tongue.

"Mind you, Mrs. Hillier," he said, "I'm all for Prohibition. It's having a wonderful effect upon the efficiency and

well-being of the working classes. I can tell that by the saving bank returns. But people like ourselves can be trusted with drink without wanting to beat their wives or stop away Mondays. When you come round to dinner at my little house—and I hope you will—you'll have something to say about my champagne, Veuve Clicquot and the real stuff. Only don't tell Mrs. Sturge or my reputation will be ruined with her!"

Sylvia nearly ruined her reputation with Mrs. Sturge by talking brightly to her neighbour on the subject of French novels, while her hostess was engaged in a monologue to the other guests on her travels in Italy, where the local sanitation, she said, was deplorable. Sylvia was conscious of a hushed silence and a frightened look on Edward's face as she cited Guy de Maupassant as the master of the short story to the silver-haired owner of a hardware company who was a devotee of French literature, translated into good American.

"My dear," said Mrs. Sturge, "I was saying——" she said it all over again.

Sylvia also wrecked one of these dinner parties for a time by giving an imitation in the drawing room of Sacha Guitry in one of his passionate moments. It was for the benefit of Mrs. Marshal-Choate Pickering, who had spent the winter in Paris, and had seen all the best plays and some of the worst. In discussing them Sylvia had been carried away by old memories and had forgotten her environment. Hence this indiscretion which was rewarded by the laughter and applause of several gentlemen standing round, until they were abashed by the voice of Mrs. Sturge.

"My dear, much as we love France and her heroism during the war, we do not wish to import its improprieties, or to convert my drawing-room into the Moulin Rouge of Montmartre."

"But my dear Mrs. Sturge," said Sylvia, feeling rather pale, "Sacha Guitry is the most distinguished actor and I was only imitating his little mannerisms."

"French actors are invariably immoral," said Mrs. Sturge severely. "And, indeed, to be quite frank, I have no respect

for the morality of the French nation as a whole. Many of our young men who went to the war came back sadly altered."

That night Edward, taking her back in the Chrysler Six, gave Sylvia a word of warning.

"If I were you I wouldn't depart from the strict rules of conventionality in Mrs. Sturge's drawing-room. She's a good friend and wants to be kind, but she can make things very uncomfortable if she takes a dislike."

"Sorry!" said Sylvia meekly.

Presently she gave a silvery laugh.

"That was good about the Moulin Rouge!"

Presently she put her hand through Edward's arm as he drove up to their front door.

"American husband! I'm beginning to break down under this idealism. You're all too good in the United States. I want to meet somebody wicked."

"There's Julia Trumbull Shibley," said Edward. "She's the Lucrezia Borgia of Grand Rapids, and I think you're seeing too much of her. Watch out!"

"She's very amusing," said Sylvia.

"And highly dangerous," said Edward.

Miss Julia Trumbull Shibley lived next door to Sylvia, in a fine house with a touch of Gothic in its pointed roofs and windows. Her father was the president of some company connected with the furniture business, though Sylvia was vague about that. He was a great friend and associate of Mr. Hillier, senior. Mrs. Shibley was a dear lady from Virginia, proud of her old English ancestry, and with charming manners. Miss Julia Trumbull Shibley, their only daughter, was an anxiety to them, as her mother confessed one day to Sylvia. She had served in a hospital near Paris during the war, and since coming back had been restless and discontented, and wild in her opinions. Grand Rapids didn't seem to give her what she wanted, and she had broken two engagements with nice young men because she found them dull. It was all very distressing, said Mrs. Shibley.

But Sylvia was glad of her company when Edward was working at the factory—he kept long hours—and time was

beginning to hang heavily as the winter afternoons closed in. Julia—she desired to be called that after half-an-hour's talk—came in frequently and stayed to tea, and poured her soul out with an intimate and sometimes passionate revelation of her thoughts and desire. She was a handsome young woman of twenty-eight, with a very pale face and very black eyes, and she used lip stick and powder-puff rather too freely over Sylvia's Hepplewhite tea-table.

She had a habit of asking sudden, frank, and embarrassing questions, which Sylvia refused to answer except by laughter.

"How do you like being married?" . . . "Did you have any lovers before you met Edward?" . . . "Do you agree with married women being faithful to their husbands?" . . . "Don't you think American men are very unexciting, compared with French and English?" . . .

She adored France and Paris, and told innumerable stories of the French *poilus* she had nursed during the war. They were wonderful men, like children in their simplicity, and yet heroes in their courage and love of France. She was sorry the war was over—and it seemed a thousand years ago! In spite of all its agony and death—and she had seen a good deal of that—it was a time of wonderful experience. All the best, as well as all the worst of life, came out in time of war. Everybody counted for something. Each individual spirit was part of a great flame of passion—passion of sacrifice, passion of patriotism, passion of love. After the war everything seemed to be vulgar and futile and commonplace. There was no purpose in life. No adventure!

She had stayed on in France as long as she could, and after peace she had gone to Austria to nurse starving babies. When she came back to Grand Rapids she felt there was nothing left in life. People talked such punk! There was no bridge of thought or speech between those who had been in the war and those who hadn't. Sometimes at dinner-tables, when the talk was on Prohibition, or the price of labour, or interior decoration, or rock gardens, she wanted to scream out and say, "You people don't understand life! You haven't seen men dying in agony. You're all so satis-

fied with your fat prosperity and your little moralities. What do you get out of life? Where's its big thrill? What's behind all this American civilisation with its tiled bath-rooms, and self-righteousness, and Monroe Doctrine, and grabbing at culture by short cuts?"

"I hope you don't say those things in Mrs. Sturge's drawing-room!" cried Sylvia, laughing.

"Mrs. Sturge doesn't trouble me with her invitations," said Julia. "Thank God for that! She dropped me like a hot poker when the news went round that I had broken my engagement with the Van Oost boy because he didn't like my views on free love." . . .

They were rather shocking views. Sylvia found them objectionable and disturbing. Julia did not believe in the loyalty of husbands, and asserted the claims of women to equal liberty. It was an obsession in her mind, and though Sylvia tried to steer her off that topic, she kept coming back to it. And yet she was very amusing, and alternated between moods of extreme gaiety and profound melancholy. She read omniverously of the latest fiction, and wrote novels under the name of William Stenning Mann, which were banned in the public library of Grand Rapids but read secretly with great delight by the college students of Ann Arbour and Jackson. They contained a good deal of cave-man stuff, and their heroes would have pleased Uncle Jack because of their primitive strength and their brutality of love-making. Sylvia found them amazingly dull and badly written.

There was one little habit of Julia's which Sylvia noticed with surprise and regret, but with no sense of moral superiority, after a certain incident at a certain party. It was Julia's craving for alcoholic stimulant. She was quite frank about it.

"If you want to enjoy my conversation," she explained, "you must provide me with a highball now and then. I can't do without it, since Prohibition made me take deliberately to drink as a moral protest against its tyranny. The college boys with their hip flasks first lured me into this agreeable form of vice. It has now become a habit! With-

out a little alcoholic poison I find life intolerably dull. My conversation loses that sparkle which makes me popular with tired business men and bored wives."

"If I were you," said Sylvia, "I'd break myself of that habit. I've had one little experience, and it has cured me for life."

But she was weak enough to provide an occasional high-ball from the cellar which had been generously stocked by Mr. Hillier, senior, though Edward never touched it on principle, and even disliked the idea of producing it for friends who frankly confessed that even friendship was strained by dry dinner parties. Mrs. Sturge had to be humoured, but they could not always live on such a high level of austerity. It was not in human nature, as found even in Grand Rapids, where idealism was the key-note of social life in the best circles.

Edward thought it a pity that Sylvia should make a particular friend of Julia Trumbull Shibley when there were so many charming people in the residential section, and all of them falling over each other to show her every possible kindness and goodwill. But, as Sylvia explained without convincing him, it was not particular friendship she had with Julia. The girl interested her enormously because of her unconventional views and passionate nature. She was more European than any one Sylvia had met in Grand Rapids.

"Then I'm sorry for Europe," said Edward, rather touchily.

Sylvia ignored his ill humour. "It's amusing to talk about France now and then," she said. "It's my spiritual home, as some one said of Germany."

"What about young Vauban?" asked Edward moodily, and Sylvia said:

"Yes, young Vauban, of course. It's a treat to hear French again."

Young Vauban was the French artist employed in the factory, and Sylvia's interest in him was the cause of the first little quarrel between Sylvia and Edward. Hardly a quarrel, perhaps, but a regrettable difference of opinion.

Sylvia had met him when Edward took her over the factory, proud to show her the great show-rooms with every style and period of furniture, and the workshops with their smooth-running machinery, and the sheds stocked with sweet-smelling woods from every part of the world, and the finishing and polishing rooms, and then the designing department where young artists studied the old classical models and adapted them to modern ideas, and worked out new and original designs to be placed on the market in New York and Chicago. It was then that Sylvia had spoken to young Vauban. She guessed at once that he was the French boy, and she spoke to him in his own tongue. He was surprised and delighted, and left the big blue print on which he was working to show her his book of designs. He was working out a suite in the Empire style for a millionaire on Fifth Avenue.

"How long have you been in America?" asked Sylvia.

"Two years!" He gave a deep sigh and smiled rather sadly.

"Two years in exile, and all that time since I've been in Paris. It seems like a lifetime."

"Don't you like the United States?" asked Sylvia.

He gave a quick glance round the room, as though afraid of expressing his opinion too openly. But then he spoke frankly.

"I earn good money, and everybody tries to be kind. But all the same, it's an exile, you understand. I'm a Parisian. I was born in the rue Cherche-Midi—you know it?—I was educated in the Quartier Latin—you know what that means? I used to prowl about the bookstalls on the *quais,* and feed the birds in the gardens of the Luxembourg and make the *bombe* in Montparnasse! The spirit of Paris gets into one's blood, *n'est-ce pas?* . . . And I have a mother and sister there."

"Are you going back?" asked Sylvia. This talk about Paris excited her. She too had been brought up in Paris and its beauty was in her blood.

"In six months," said young Vauban. "I'm counting the days."

"You're lucky!" said Sylvia. "Only six months more—and then Paris!"

He seemed rather startled at those words—at the emotion in them—and looked at her curiously. He was a tall young man, with a pale face and dark eyes and a lock of black hair falling over his forehead. Very good-looking, though Sylvia, although delicate, and perhaps as Edward said, rather neurotic.

"You speak French perfectly," he told her. "You know Paris well—and love it, perhaps?"

"I spent my girlhood there. My brother and I."

She asked him how he spent his time in Grand Rapids, and what people he knew. It seemed that he did not belong to the same social set as herself. After all, he was only an employee in her husband's factory, although a gentleman and an artist. He confessed that he lived rather a lonely life in lodgings. He knew some of the newspaper men, and the other artists in the factory. But he did not speak English very well, and amused himself in the evenings mostly by practising his violin. That was his hobby.

"You must come up to my house and play to me," said Sylvia.

He bowed, blushed a little, and said, *"Enchanté!"*

Edward touched her on the arm and smiled.

"You forget I don't understand a word of French. And you're rather breaking up the discipline of this factory!"

He was smiling and good-natured, but that evening, when Sylvia spoke to him about young Vauban and asked him to invite him to dinner one night, two little worried lines knitted his forehead. I'm afraid that would hardly work. The other men would be jealous. We don't entertain our staff in our private life. They belong to a different social set, you know."

"But I thought America was a democracy," said Sylvia.

Edward laughed and said, "Theoretically! And, anyhow, you know that I don't care a row of pins about social caste. All the same . . ."

"All the same I want you to ask young Vauban to din-

ner," said Sylvia. "I will write a little note to him and get him to bring his fiddle. I adore the violin."

"Fine!" said Edward in a friendly way.

But when young Vauban came to dinner—Sylvia had also asked Julia Trumbull Shibley—Edward was undoubtedly distressed because most of the conversation was in French and because Sylvia was so enraptured with Vauban's music that it was a late hour before he left. And Edward was not very keen on music unless it was of the simple kind like a jazz tune with a good rhythm. Vauban's music was not of the simple kind. He played classical stuff like a master, no doubt, as Sylvia said, but it was torturing to Edward after two hours of it. Sylvia played his accompaniments, and chatted to him in quick, excited French, and talked of Paris as though it were a Paradise she had left behind. Edward could make that out from the expression of her eyes and little dramatic gestures. Young Vauban was polite, reverential, flattered, nervous. It was obvious that he regarded Sylvia's advent in Grand Rapids as a special miracle of God. Julia was highly amused. She too spoke French very well, but afterwards turned her attention to Edward and her own tongue.

"How lucky you have a French boy in your factory, Edward! And so good-looking! He will be a charming plaything for dear Sylvia. She craves for a little change from American business men and the ethics of Mrs. Sturge. I'm terribly glad for Sylvia's sake."

"That's good of you," said Edward coldly.

He was thankful when young Vauban departed.

The first little quarrel—not serious but disturbing—happened when Sylvia wanted to invite him again—and invited him.

XXXII

AS the months passed, smoothly and rapidly, Sylvia became accustomed to life in Grand Rapids as the wife of an American husband. It seemed to her sometimes that all that other life in Europe—her girlhood—was but a dream of some former existence in another world. She became acclimatised to central heating. She read the *New York Times* and the local Press with an intelligent interest in American politics, the latest murder story, and the social news, no longer bewildered by the headlines or exasperated by the necessity of turning to page 16 to find the end of a narrative on page 3. She learnt the American language, even to the extent of understanding the general trend of base-ball reports, and shocked Edward at times by her rapid acquisition of American slang, in which she found constant amusement and delight.

She devoted a good deal of her spare time—and she had too much on her hands while Edward worked for long hours at the factory—to the reading of American fiction as represented by Sinclair Lewis, Joseph Hergesheimer, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Edith Wharton, Gertrude Atherton, and Fannie Hurst. In loyalty to Edward she endeavoured to acquire the American point of view and to become at least fifty per cent American in sympathy and understanding. There were times when she felt a hundred per cent American, or even a hundred and one per cent. That was when she looked at her engagement book and saw how deep she was in the social life of her adopted country, and in its ethical enthusiasms.

To please Edward, and to put herself right with Grand Rapids, she attended most of the serious entertainments which were patronised by the residential section as an example to their neighbours, and as a means of keeping in touch with the things that mattered. She worked steadily through a course of lectures on the Leaders of American

Thought. She supported Mrs. Sturge in her Thursday Evenings with American Women, and had the honour of being introduced to Jane Addams and Mrs. Catt and other distinguished ladies who gave drawing-room talks on the moral problems of the day. She joined the debating section of the Women's Country Club, and occasionally gave her views on such subjects as The Future of Europe, and Co-Education, and Should Girls Read Novels?—not without success, owing to a gift of speech which surprised herself, as soon as she had recovered from her first shyness at hearing the sound of her own voice.

Then there were classical concerts by Miss Myra Hess and other visitors touring the United States, not forgetting Grand Rapids, and screen pictures with a moral message which could not be missed because of their unusual beauty and their spiritual mission in a wicked world. There were prize days at the College for Young Ladies, where Edward's mother was one of the Governors, and the annual banquets given to the employees in the Hillier factories, with a brass band and a good deal of oratory devoted to the high place of artistic furniture in American home life, and to the efficiency, loyalty, and spirit of progress in the Hillier works. There were Ladies' Nights at the Rotary Club, when Edward spoke very finely on the subject of human brotherhood and world peace—Sylvia was very proud of him—and Committee meetings of the American Red Cross, presided over by Mrs. Sturge, who at such times was amazingly like the late Queen Victoria in dignity and graciousness and austerity of virtue.

All that sort of thing might be called the public life of Mrs. Hillier, junior, who had once been Sylvia Fleming. Grand Rapids—or its leading ladies and their hard-working husbands—liked to see her in their assemblies, falling so quickly into the spirit of American good works, looking so beautiful in the frocks which cost Edward a lot of money, but not more than he could afford and was glad to pay, and doing credit to the younger married set, who were not to be beaten, said Mr. Hillier, senior, in good looks, charming

manners, and social elegance, by any other city in the United States.

Because she was English Sylvia attracted particular notice and received more than usual kindness from the elderly ladies of Grand Rapids. Over and over again they assured her of their desire to make her feel perfectly at home. Because of her prettiness, her gaiety, her youth, the elderly or middle-aged husbands gathered round her with smiling eyes and little compliments which were an assurance of good will. Among the younger married set she was popular with both husbands and wives, who competed with each other to give her a good time, and to secure her, with Edward, for their dinner parties, their dances, and their motor trips. It was a larger, more intense, more crowded life than anything Sylvia had known in Europe. The American people, she found, had a genius for "getting together," and inexhaustible reserves for hospitality and friendliness. They were keen, vital, good-natured, enthusiastic.

The young men were simple, hard-working and ambitious to "make good," socially and financially. There was none of that tiredness, doubt, lack of purpose, cynicism and drift with which she had reproached Neville and his friends in England. These young Americans were prosperous and sure of themselves. They wanted to be more prosperous. And their young wives were proud of their homes, and satisfied with their husbands. They looked forward to bigger houses, more money to spend on interior decoration, more powerful limousines, trips to Europe, holidays at Palm Beach, and the splendour of a steadily rising social position, as surely as the years passed.

It was all very wonderful, thought Sylvia. All very admirable. Certainly the people of the United States were much to be envied. And as far as she could see, which was not very far—not farther than the residential section of Grand Rapids—they all seemed very happy and pleased with life. Julia Trumbull Shibley with her restless discontent was quite an exception, apart from one or two young wives who seemed to be tired of their husbands, and a few men who, at Edward's dinner-table, spoke gloomily of the future

of America, and prophesied its "doom" because of its foreign elements, unassimilated by the American traditions, and full of danger.

Well, Sylvia was happy and contented, except for a homesickness which, after six months in America, began to attack her like a secret malady, in sharp spasms. She kept it secret from Edward as much as possible, although sometimes he found her weeping, and was dismayed.

It attacked her now after every mail from England with letters from her mother and Stephen. There was nothing in those letters to unsettle her or make her restless. Her mother wrote in her erratic style with little dots and dashes, describing her shopping expeditions, the last play she had seen, the wet weather in London, her state of health, which was not so good as it ought to be, and sending loving messages from herself and Stephen.

Now and again she revealed some of her old emotionalism, and her flippant sense of humour. Since the death of the Colonel she had taken to religion again. She was getting old enough, she said, to think of securing a "fire insurance" for the next world. She had been a very wicked and foolish woman, and would never forgive herself for her disloyalty to one of the noblest men who ever lived. All the same, she hated growing old, especially as the looking-glass utterly refused to verify that awful fact. . . . She was deplorably lonely since Sylvia's marriage, and she detested loneliness so much that she had been tempted to answer an advertisement in the "Agony" column of *The Times*, "Wanted, good-looking widow, affectionate disposition, small means, willing to marry elderly bachelor needing cheerful companionship. Photographs exchanged. Highest references desired and given."

She still hankered after a more active kind of life! If it hadn't been for the disastrous experience of the shop in Bond Street—that wretch Uncle Jack!—she would like to take up some business in London which would satisfy her sense of adventure. . . . She saw some of her old friends at times—Henry Carey was still faithful—but there were many days when she missed her dear Sylvia with an

aching heart and found life empty. . . . Stephen was doing well at the Slade School, and was beginning to earn a little money by illustrations for the magazines. He was devoted to her, but as she did not care for his particular friends—mostly young people of advanced Socialistic views—she did not see as much of him as she wanted. He was too old, anyhow, to cling to her apron-strings—not that she wore apron-strings, thank heaven! . . .

". . . Oh, my dear, life is very difficult, especially when youth has gone. So much disillusion! So many regrets! Such a sense of futility after all one's hopes, ambitions, dreams, and that Old Age with its terrors advancing with a stealthy tread! Be happy while you can, avoid the need of regret, store up reserves of happiness, and secure the comradeship of your husband, so that you can grow old together, when the time comes. I am all in favour of the old-fashioned marriage with lots of children, and utter loyalty—*Semper Fidelis,* as your father used to say! When are you going to give me joyful news? . . . I enclose a letter from Stephen. . . ."

Stephen's letters were short and uncommunicative. He hoped Sylvia was having a good time. He missed her horribly. It was foul weather in London. He would never make a decent artist. Sidney Swinton was sweet on another girl. Frank Lawton still played the same old tunes on his banjo. Life was pretty dull generally, and he could think of nothing to tell her. He supposed she was getting used to America and having a great time with the millionaires. There were still a million unemployed in England and no sign of anything being done for them by any Government. He was all in favour of the Labour crowd. They were the only people with any serious ideals and common sense.

He added a postscript to his last letter:

"I miss you abominably, old girl. I wish to God you hadn't married an American husband."

Sylvia's American husband did not see that postscript. He was so easily hurt by words like that, and she hated to

hurt him. Nor did he see the tears that splashed on Stephen's letter when she read those words. It was strange how often now the tears came into her eyes. Perhaps she was not feeling well. Perhaps all this strange life in Grand Rapids was beginning to tell on her nerves. She was getting "nervy," and restless, like Julia Trumbull Shibley, and with moods of excessive gaiety followed by hours of dark depression and melancholy.

Though she fought against it, a sense of exile was beginning to invade her and take possession of her spirit. Stephen spoke of "foul weather" in London. Well, she would give a year or two of life to be under an umbrella in the slush of the London streets again, and to go down the Fulham Road to Stephen's studio with a bag of buns under her arm, or some crumpets to be toasted at the stove. There would be free conversation in the studio. She wouldn't have to set a guard about her tongue lest Mrs. Sturge should be distressed. She wouldn't have to behave with the propriety of a leading lady in the younger married set, smiling sweetly at silver-headed business men who were "proud to meet her," and told her anecdotes which she had heard before.

She wouldn't have to indulge in so much idealism and "uplift." She wouldn't live in a house with four bathrooms, and every modern convenience as advertised for the ideal home in the *Saturday Evening Post,* too large and too lonely for her when Edward was away at the factory, and too rich, anyhow. She couldn't live entirely on "interior decoration." There were times when she hated the Spanish chestnut panelling, and the Tudor dining-room, and the early American style, and all the rest of it. There were times when she hated the two Swedish maids with their tow-coloured hair and their simple blue eyes, and their clumsy red hands, although they were devoted to her.

There were times when she revolted with a kind of hysteria against the moral activity of Grand Rapids—those lectures and debates, those ladies' nights at the Rotary Club!—and the earnest, virtuous, strenuous idealism of all these ladies who desired to make the world wise and good and

clean, to like the things that ought to be liked, to read the books that contained a "message," to grasp the Beautiful and the True wherever they might be met in the best social circles.

Sometimes she tried to explain her sense of revolt to Edward, but he was only perplexed, and sometimes distressed.

"You're all too earnest!" she cried once. "No wonder some of you take to secret drinking. It's the only escape from this overwhelming idealism. Why can't you be good without wanting to make everybody else good? Why can't you be flippant, and talk nonsense, and do mad, silly things now and then, instead of organising 'drives' for the relief of starving babies, and collecting the wisdom of the world's literature in tabloid form, and gushing about the latest message from some exalted highbrow, who probably lives with another man's wife, or kills his own by moral platitudes?"

"Isn't that rather unfair?" asked Edward, raising his eyebrows.

"I want to be unfair," said Sylvia. "I feel the need of being unfair, dear Edward!"

"Aren't you losing your sense of humour for once?" he asked with his attractive smile.

She admitted that her sense of humour was severely strained by having to live up to the exalted state of Edward Hillier's wife, as a leading lady of the younger married set in the best residential section.

"I can't keep it up all the time," she said. "I want to say 'to hell with Abraham Lincoln!' or something frightful like that, in Mrs. Sturge's drawing-room."

"For the love of Mike—don't!" said Edward, looking seriously scared.

He didn't understand. But he was invariably good-natured, patient, kind and chivalrous. She wished to goodness that he wouldn't be so invariably kind. She would have welcomed a bout of bad temper from him, so that she might have an excuse for a grievance. She would have liked him to clout her head, so that she might have liberated her

emotion by a tragic scene of injured innocence. . . . She didn't understand herself. What was wrong with these people of Grand Rapids? Nothing. They too, like Edward, were kind. Some of them had a greater sense of humour than Edward. Some of them told excellent stories, were quick at repartee, laughed a good deal. Their idealism was perfectly sincere. They were ready to back it by dollars—for any kind of charity that touched them.

They wanted to make the world a better place to live in, for themselves and others. There was nothing wrong with that, surely? And yet she wished that they would leave the world alone to look after itself. They wanted to organise it too much. They wanted to make morality as efficient as a Ford factory. They were systematic even about beauty and art. You could learn all about interior decoration in a dollar handbook. All about Architecture in a small-sized volume. The wisdom of the world in twenty volumes. All about Life in the moral talks of Dr. Frank Crane.

No, that wasn't fair! It wasn't fair! She liked these people of Grand Rapids. She was enormously grateful to them. They had far more quality, zest of life, high spirit, practical enthusiasm, than any crowd in any city of Europe. And yet sometimes she felt that if she lived with them always she would lose her own individuality and be smothered —crushed—spiritually killed. The virtue of the virtuous, and the Hillier set were mostly virtuous, was too terribly oppressive. She must escape from it sometimes or die

XXXIII

IT was Julia Trumbull Shibley who gave her the chance of escape now and then. She belonged to a set less exalted in moral character, and free in speech and ideas. . . . Sylvia found them refreshing. They were the rebels of Grand Rapids, in open revolt against the authority of Mrs. Sturge and all she stood for. They defied Prohibition and all the Blue Laws. They made a hobby of home-brews and patronised the local bootleggers. They were fierce critics of Intolerance and declared an intellectual warfare against the Ku Klux Klan and other minor tyrannies, including the literary censorship which had banned the novels of Julia. They ridiculed the moral platitudes of President Harding, poured scorn upon the hundred per cent patriotism of the American Legion, denounced Big Business, and regarded Lenin as the greatest statesman in Europe.

Their American hero was a certain Mr. Debbs, who had been imprisoned as a pacifist and democrat for conscience' sake, and they read the American *Nation*, firstly because it was not allowed in Mrs. Sturge's drawing-room or in the houses of Mrs. Sturge's social set. This group of rebels met in the apartment of their leader, Leighton Dick, editor of the Grand Rapids *Eye-Opener* and author of several important and revolutionary works on sociology. He was a young red-headed man with a great gift of eloquence, especially after several glasses of his own home-brew, which he made in his bedroom. At these times he spoke as a man inspired, and prophesied the doom of the United States and the death of its soul, unless it fought a death struggle with Intolerance, which, he said, was the devouring dragon to whom Liberty was sacrificed like a maiden tribute.

He was very friendly with Julie Trumbull Shibley, for whose passionate discontent he had a high respect. Among his devotees and companions in revolt were two ladies who had been divorced from their husbands in the cause of Lib-

erty, several newspaper correspondents, the political cartoonist of *The Eye-Opener,* an elderly architect remarkably like Mr. George Bernard Shaw, two college boys belonging to a "Greek letter society"—it had something to do with the literary craft—the organist of the Second Church of Christ Scientist, a specialist in ladies neckwear, two unmarried girls who had studied art in Paris—they drank too many cocktails—and a Russian professor from Ann Arbour whose family had been exiled in Siberia in the time of Czardom. There was also Henri Vauban, who had been introduced to Leighton Dick by Julie and who came more frequently now that Sylvia might be there to talk French with him.

Sylvia was received cordially and respectfully by Leighton Dick when she went for the first time with Julia, but he warned her that she was risking her social reputation in Grand Rapids.

"'Abandon hope all ye who enter here,'" he said, "if you wish to retain the good will of Mrs. Sturge and her circle of rich, virtuous (or not-yet-found-out), and intolerant friends. This apartment of mine is out-of-bounds to our austere Prohibitionists. It is taboo to our defenders of Big Business and State Tyranny. I am the pariah dog of Grand Rapids. This is the home of free speech and liberal ideas and therefore a stink of iniquity in the nostrils of those who fear the truth!"

It was certainly a very amusing place and the company was entertaining. There was also a pleasant sense of adventure and liberty in those unconventional parties where the guests sat around on the floor listening to the excited monologues of Leighton Dick, drinking strange liquids which he produced from his bedroom, or discussing the philosophy of life, the meaning of Art, the future of civilisation, with critical and destructive views. It was more like Europe, as Sylvia had known it in Paris and in Chelsea, than anything she had seen in Grand Rapids. It was a great relief to the formality of Mrs. Sturge's dinner parties.

And yet she had a sense of guilt in going there. Edward disapproved. He disliked Leighton Dick, and detested the

company he kept. He was strongly prejudiced against Julia Trumbull Shibley, whom he regarded as a neurotic and immoral young woman. He was distressed to think that Sylvia should find any pleasure in the society of people who talked dangerous hot air and drank liquid poison with the deliberate intention of defying the laws of their country. Those two college boys with their hip flasks ought to be flogged. As for the women who indulged in secret drinking, they were a disgrace to their sex. He implored Sylvia to cut out Leighton Dick and his crowd if she valued her good name and his own.

"But my dearest Edward," said Sylvia, "they amuse me! I find them interesting and stimulating, and I'm learning a lot about the United States. They're perfectly respectable and vastly entertaining. I had no idea you were so intolerant."

"I'm not intolerant," said Edward, "but I draw the line at high treason and social anarchy. Those people are essentially immoral. Their ideas are subversive of all that we stand for in the United States—law and order and decent citizenship."

"You're a Tory Die-Hard!" said Sylvia, rumpling his hair.

He did not forbid her to go to Leighton Dick's. He only asked her not to go. But she compromised by promising not to go very often—not more than once a week.

For one thing, she liked to talk French to Henri Vauban, and to hear him play the violin; and as Edward hated music and refused to have him up at the house, it was a convenient place to see him now and then and listen to his magic touch. Surely Edward could not deny her a little pleasure like that?

No, Edward could not deny her anything. If she held out for the moon he would climb to the highest tree and make a grab for it! All the same, he was distressed and sorry that she preferred such company to the nice people of his own set.

"I don't prefer them," said Sylvia, "but they're a change."

Yes, she felt a little guilty when she went with Julia

again, because of Edward's disapproval, especially when Julia drank too much and became foolishly excited, and laughed hysterically, and allowed Leighton Dick to kiss her neck. It was rather disgusting, but after all it was life, and she wanted to see life. Also there was Henri Vauban, who was extraordinarily charming, and very melancholy because of his exile, and a master on the violin. It was nice to be kind to him, and to let him tell her about his mother and sister, and to talk about French books and pictures and history and places. He confessed to her that her friendship had made all the difference to him in Grand Rapids. Just to talk French again—it took the ache out of his heart.

They sat together in Leighton Dick's rooms, and Sylvia ignored Julia's smiling glances and her whispered innuendoes. She was really a foolish creature at times. As if there need be anything wrong in a little kindness to this lonely French boy, who spoke broken English and missed half the conversation because of its American slang. Of course, like all young Frenchmen, he was apt to be sentimental and romantic in his friendship with women, but Sylvia was used to that. She had been brought up in France, and understood.

She was interested to hear his views about the United States. In spite of his bad English, he had kept his ears open and studied the character of the American people. He was a little sarcastic at their expense, sometimes, and yet he acknowledged their tremendous qualities.

"Their energy," he said, "it's frightening! There's something dynamic and tremendous in a big nation which never keeps still, which is always pulling things down and building things up, and organising, and 'speeding up' efficiency, and beating up idealism, and getting emotional over abstract ideas and high moralities. In France we're cynical and don't believe much in moral progress. The peasant farmer ignores all the chatter in Paris. He attends to the earth. But over here the whole country is swept by some moral platitude uttered by a President or the latest prophet. And they believe that human nature can be altered and organised into goodness and noble action. Then again, they worship the

State. They are intolerant of individual rights. Majority opinion rules. The minority must be hammered into submission. The eccentric individual is regarded as a nuisance to society. In France, and perhaps in England, we believe more in the right of the individual to think what he likes and live as he likes. Instinctively we're against the Government and all government."

"Well, there are rebels here," said Sylvia. She listened to Leighton Dick denouncing the "tyranny" of the Party Machine.

Henri Vauban smiled, and shrugged his shoulders.

"All that is too self-conscious. They're just playing with the idea of revolt, like boys who pretend to be bandits. In France when we're thirsty we drink red wine. Here they drink, not because they're thirsty, but because it's stolen fruit, and rather naughty. I don't like to see these women drinking. It becomes a habit."

He talked of Paris again. They knew the same old churches, and were haunted by the same ghosts of history.

"You must come to dinner again," said Sylvia. "We must have some more music."

Henri Vauban smiled, and looked at her with curious eyes.

"I'm afraid your husband doesn't like music."

"American husbands are very kind," said Sylvia. "Mine will be patient while you play."

"I have a little apartment," said Henri Vauban; "not very grand, but large enough for a small party. If you would honour me one evening, I would play as much as you like—without worrying your husband. Perhaps Miss Shibley would come too."

Sylvia hesitated. Edward might object. On the other hand, why should he object? He was working late in the factory—stock-taking, or annual accounts, or something. She had a spare evening with nothing to do. Why not?"

"How about Wednesday?" she asked. "After dinner. I will bring Julia."

He was enchanted. Julia also thought it would be "great fun."

There was nothing wrong in it. It was absurd for Ed-

ward to be so glum about it when she told him. She was utterly loyal to him, completely and absolutely devoted. Why make a fuss because now and then she liked to hear a little music, to talk French, to take tea—yes, she took tea a few times in Henri Vauban's tiny rooms—with a young man who was polite, respectful and highly educated? Julia was always there, "and after all," said Sylvia, "I *am* a married woman."

Edward disclaimed all idea of making a fuss.

"It's the last thing in the world I should dream of doing," he said with his quiet smile; "but I just want to give you a friendly warning. You see, Grand Rapids isn't like London or Paris. One's movements are watched. People gossip. They're already gossiping, Sylvia. Mrs. Sturge spoke to my mother last night about your visits to Leighton Dick and young Vauban."

Sylvia was extremely annoyed at that news. She accused Mrs. Sturge of having "spies" about. She also permitted herself to call Mrs. Sturge a she-dragon.

"No," said Edward, "she was perfectly kind and sweet about it. She quite understands that you're amused to see different types of Americans. But she thinks I ought to give you a hint that Leighton Dick is not received in the best set, and that it's not in the code of Grand Rapids for a young married woman to take tea in the rooms of one of her husband's employees. Not without her husband, anyway."

"My dear old Edward," said Sylvia, "are you really tied to the apron-strings of Mrs. Sturge? I always knew that she was the Autocrat of the Dinner Table, but I really didn't understand that she controlled the private lives of the younger married set."

"Not our private lives," answered Edward cheerfully. "All the same, I want you to be careful, honey. My good name, and yours, must be safeguarded against gossip in the residential section. Cæsar's wife must be above suspicion. Also the wife of Edward Hillier, junior."

"Edward!" cried Sylvia, "if I didn't love you so much I should be really angry. Have I done anything to cause suspicion? In your mind or anybody else's?"

"Not in my mind," answered Edward. "I'm as sure of your loyalty as I am of my own love. But you know how people talk!"

"Let them talk!" said Sylvia, and she distressed her husband enormously by bursting into tears. Yes, undoubtedly her nerves were going wrong. She was conscious of that herself, and she knew that Edward was conscious of it, and his mother. She found Edward watching her at times with a most anxious and tender look; and Mrs. Hillier enquired too frequently about her health. Was she feeling quite well? Perfectly well! Was she feeling headachey or anything like that? Nothing like that, thank you, dear Mrs. Hillier!

She did not tell them—not even Edward—that she was terribly homesick, and that Europe was calling to her with a loud, strong voice. Sometimes at night, when Edward thought she was asleep, she lay thinking of the way to Europe. Grand Rapids to Detroit. Detroit to New York; then eight days across the sea. Then London, Paris, Florence, Rome, among the people she knew, in the cities she loved. She would go for a tour with her mother and Stephen. They would go to see the old places, visit the picture galleries, sit on the terraces, sipping rose-tinted ices, in the Pavilion Bleu at St. Cloud, in the Borghese Gardens, on the Promenade des Anglais at Nice. They would listen to the open-air bands, watch the amusing types that passed, meet a hundred old friends, chatter in French and Italian, get deep into the heart of Europe again. Then London, with a fog in the Fulham Road, and a bright fire burning in the cosy sitting-room at Montpelier Square. Perhaps Neville would drop in to talk nonsense and make her laugh. . . . No, not Neville. He was somewhere in Canada, the other side of Alberta, farming. She had had one letter letter from him, hoping she was happy. He was working like a French peasant and liking it. Better than lounging about London, without a purpose in life.

". . . I feel less of a parasite," he wrote. "I'm one of the pioneers of the New World—glorious and noble

thought! But I am also harking back to the primitive man who eats, sleeps and works without an idea in his head except about the next meal, the next drink, and the next clod of earth. All my elaborate education has gone for nothing. My exquisite taste in socks and fancy ties can no longer be satisfied. My noble blood, the traditions of an ancient and dishonourable family, are of no account in this simple community of Scottish peasantry under a Canadian boss who drives us hard."

So he had written, with one or two other sentences which had given her a little thrill of emotion.

". . . Sometimes when I'm heaving earth I think of our first dance together in the attic room at Oakwood. It was then we found out that we laughed at the same things. Do you ever remember our jokes? . . ."

Yes, she often remembered, and now in Grand Rapids she would have given her left hand sometimes for an hour or two with that friend and cousin. Without disloyalty to Edward, whom she loved. So silly to think that marriage should destroy friendship! . . . Once or twice she spoke to Edward about a trip to Europe.

"When are we going, Edward? You remember your promise?"

Yes, he remembered, and hoped to go in May—or June. Five months more. In another month or two she would begin to count the days.

In another month or two she began to count the days—sixty days more—fifty days more—thirty! She was secretly excited to the point of sickness. Edward had promised to do that foreign tour. Her mother and Stephen would join them. They would go to France, to the Riviera—Monte Carlo again!—Florence, Rome, Naples. They would have a wonderful three months. She began to get new frocks for the trip. She had written to her mother and Stephen and they were looking forward to seeing her with longing

and delight. Stephen had made up his mind to do any orgy of sketching.

Fifteen days more. The passages had been booked on the *Olympic*. Mr. and Mrs. Hillier, senior, were already looking unhappy at losing them for three months. They had arranged a series of small dinner parties before their departure. Then a tragic blow came straight out of the blue sky and smashed all such plans. Edward's father, always rather delicate in the chest, caught a cold by driving home from Mrs. Sturge's house after dinner without an overcoat. It developed into pneumonia. In three days he was dead—that little good-hearted man in horn-rimmed spectacles who had been so full of vitality and bounce, who laughed so heartily at his own little jokes, who had built up a great business without greed or harshness or corruption, but with high ideals which he had carried out in simplicity and pride, and who had remained always with "the heart of a boy," as his wife had said one day to Sylvia.

Sylvia wept by his bedside, where he lay like a little wax figure, with a faint smile about his lips as though he had seen a joke at leaving. She had lost a good friend, devoted to her, proud of her, always giving her little presents, always anxious for her happiness and comfort at the house he had furnished for her, invariably delighted to praise her beauty and to laugh at her laughter. Little American business man, with a heart of gold, and charity to all the world, who believed that Grand Rapids was the finest city on God's earth, and his wife the loveliest woman, and his friends the noblest type of "regular fellows." Mrs. Hillier was heart-broken, but very brave.

After the funeral Edward spoke to Sylvia about the trip to Europe.

"I'm afraid it's off for another year. Impossible to leave the factory now. I shall have a thousand things to learn."

Those words "another year" were like dull blows at Sylvia's heart. It was a tragic disappointment.

Edward understood and took her in his arms.

"I hate to spoil that holiday of yours, after all your plans. And with your mother and Stephen waiting for you!

He kissed her on the lips, and made a generous offer—the most generous offer that any man could make to a young wife.

"Would you care to go alone? I'd try to survive for three months without you."

She shook her head and held him tight.

"Not without you, American husband. I may be foolish, but I'm not mean."

He was glad of that loyalty, and thanked God in his heart for it. But he did not see how much she wept alone in her own room that evening when he went down to the factory to see the managers.

Another year in Grand Rapids! Another year without Europe! Another year away from Stephen and her mother!

She could hardly bear it.

XXXIV

IT was unfortunate for Sylvia that after the death of Mr. Hillier, senior, Edward should have been so busy at the factory. Several times a week he telephoned through to her from his office saying that he would be late again. He was terribly sorry, but after all he could not let the business down; and he had to work double shifts now that he had the whole thing on his own shoulders, and lots to learn. Would Sylvia forgive and understand? Perhaps she would go round to his mother's house, or attend that lecture on The Danger in Europe by that English correspondent? He would like to know what the fellow had got to say. Or would she care to let him meet her at Mrs. Sturge's At Home, some time after ten o'clock?

Sylvia gave little groans down the telephone.

"What, late again, Edward! Why can't you let that old furniture look after itself? The whole world isn't clamouring for your beastly bedsteads. . . . Well, anyhow, I'm your wife, though you seem to like the factory best. . . . Yes, I understand all right—American husband! Business first!"

No, she wouldn't go to that lecture on The Danger in Europe. She was fed-up with lectures. Nor would she go to Mrs. Sturge's At Home. She had been to three of her At Homes in the last fortnight and four committe-meetings, with Mrs. Sturge in the chair. It was too much of a good thing. Besides, Mrs. Sturge was not very cordial these days. She didn't approve of Sylvia's friendship with Julia. She had said some very acid things about Leighton Dick and his home-brew parties. And she always knew when Sylvia had been round to those gatherings. She had her spies everywhere in Grand Rapids. She also knew that Sylvia was seeing a good deal of young Vauban, and took it upon herself to reprove Sylvia for "serious indiscretion."

"My dear," she had said, only the other night, "don't think

me an interfering old woman, but I don't think it's quite wise of you to visit that young Frenchman while your husband is working overtime. Yes, I know he plays the violin like an archangel, and I know that Julia Trumbull Shibley always goes with you. There's nothing wrong in it, of course, but it leads to scandal. You're being talked about in Grand Rapids. It's not a good example with the younger married set."

"My dear Mrs. Sturge," Sylvia had answered very haughtily, "if Grand Rapids is going to worry itself about my private affairs, I'm very sorry for Grand Rapids. They'll have to keep on worrying."

Mrs. Sturge expressed the opinion that it might be Sylvia's turn to get worried.

And she was right, after all. Sylvia began to get worried a little about young Vauban. He was becoming rather foolish. He was beginning to say rather ridiculous things. He was behaving in a way that rather—well—alarmed her. She had had no idea that her kindness to him, her interest in him, her pleasure in talking French to him, and listening to his music, would put silly ideas into his head. He believed that she was unhappy with her husband because once or twice she had told him about her homesickness, and because she denied the right of husbands to dictate the friendships of their wives, and because when he came up to the house, at her invitation, Edward was silent, and looked more sulky than he really was. The boy was romantic and sentimental like most young Frenchmen, and she had been amused at first when he had said tender and chivalrous little things with an ardent look in his eyes. In French they did not seem very shocking to a young married woman. It was the language of France, which she loved. She would have thought nothing of them if Julia Trumbull Shibley had not laughed and blushed and made such absurd remarks about her "French lover." They had had a quarrel about that, until Julia had lost her temper and said wicked and spiteful things in a sudden rage.

"Oh, you pretend to be very virtuous, but I don't think your noble husband would like the way you carry on with his

French designer. I don't mind, believe me! It amuses me intensely, Sylvia dear! But don't kid yourself that you're superior to the rest of the feminine world. We all have our little weaknesses. Mine is the afternoon highball."

That had startled Sylvia—shocked her a little. Perhaps she had been rather indiscreet, after all. She decided not to go with Julia again to Henry Vauban's rooms, which had been a little sanctuary from the cares of married life, filled with wonderful music, when he played to her. A pity, because she had liked it so much, and young Vauban's conversation in French had made her feel less exiled from Europe. She wrote him a note excusing herself from the next visit she had arranged. He answered in a letter imploring her to tell him in what way he had offended her. He was wretched beyond words at the thought that her beauty would not give a glory to his poor little rooms. He had looked forward to Thursday evening with passionate pleasure. Now he was deprived of the only thing that made life worth while in Grand Rapids. Could she possibly honour him on Saturday afternoon?

Sylvia decided not to honour him on Saturday afternoon, and wrote a friendly note pleading another engagement. He wrote again, a few days later, more grieved, in a state of despair. He used such foolish and pessimistic words that she put the letter in the fire—the open fireplace in the Tudor dining-room—her cheeks almost as hot as the flames. This boy dared to tell her that he loved her. He accused her husband of having forbidden her to see him. He vowed that he would die unless he had the joy of meeting her again.

She wrote back reproving him sharply for his folly, and insolence. She would never speak to him again unless he apologised for daring to say such ridiculous things. . . . Well, he apologised, humbly and pitifully. He implored her forgiveness for his folly, his audacity. If she would only forget his last letter and continue her gracious friendship with him, he would be eternally grateful. He would be leaving Grand Rapids in another month. Perhaps he would never see her again after that. It would spoil his future life,

his return to France, if the memory of her kindness to a poor exile had been wrecked by his own stupidity.

That last letter, written in French, in a firm and delicate hand, touched Sylvia's heart. After all he was a French boy. It was necessary to make allowances, for difference of temperament, for language, tradition. He would be gone in another month, and she would feel more lonely without him. It was Julia—apologetic for her outburst of bad temper—who arranged that next meeting in Leighton Dick's rooms.

Henri Vauban went a little pale when he saw her. He was very humble, reverential, and melancholy. His hand trembled at her touch. Only once or twice did he allow himself a look of adoration.

Leighton Dick was in boisterous spirits that afternoon. He made an excited oration on the subject of the American Legion, which, he said, was an American form of "Fascisti" and an instrument of reaction and bloodly militarism." Julia laughed loudly at this monologue and hoped it wouldn't get to the ears of Mrs. Sturge. The two ladies who had divorced their husbands in the cause of liberty accused Leighton Dick of being a Bolshevik. They thought he went rather too far. And they seemed to be very watchful of Sylvia and Henri Vauban—so watchful that Sylvia was aware of their curious satirical glances, and had a moment of fear. Were these two women the origin of the scandal that was being whispered about her? Was it because of their malicious chatter that she was getting cold glances from some of the older married folk who had been very kind to her when she had come to Grand Rapids? Lately she had been aware of that coldness at Mrs. Sturge's dinner parties. Some of the silver-haired men had looked at her with a kind of pity and regret. She left Leighton Dick's party rather early, and was sorry that Henri Vauban followed her immediately, especially as she saw an ironical smile in the eyes of Julie Trumbull Shibley.

She was angry with everybody in Grand Rapids. They had small, suspicious, scandalmongering minds. In Europe a married woman could have a friendship with any young man without setting every tongue wagging. Surely she was

old enough to take care of herself! Surely her reputation was above the gossip of slanderous minds.

It was pouring with rain when she found herself in the street with Henri Vauban. She spoke to him in French, and asked him to get a taxi, and at his signal a yellow cab drew alongside the kerb. Mr. Julius Schmidt, Sylvia's next-door neighbour, passed at that moment and lifted his hat, and gave a quick, hostile glance at the young Frenchman.

Henri Vauban helped her into the cab and then hesitated for a moment, standing in the rain.

"It is early," he said. "If I might play you a little music in my rooms—for the last time?"

Sylvia knew that she ought to refuse. She saw as plainly as though a message were written on the wet window-pane of the yellow cab that scandal was sure to follow. She saw the very word "Scandal" in red letters, as a danger signal. But because she was angry with Julia's ironical smile, with Mrs. Sturge's warning, with Grand Rapids and it social code, and because she was her mother's daughter, with a sense of adventure and a love of risk, she laughed a little as she sat there in the yellow cab and said *"Pourquoi pas?"*—Why not?

There seemed to be no reason why not when she went with Henri Vauban into his poorly-furnished rooms, brightened by a few etchings of Paris on the walls, and by a rosewood piano against which his violin was propped in a black leather case. He made some tea on a little stove, and she poured out for him, and it reminded her with a pang of Stephen's studio in Chelsea. It was charming when he played to her—some piece of Bach—with a strong and tender touch, to her accompaniment. There seemed to be no reason why she should not be there, in perfect innocence and simplicity of mind, with this French boy who had been so lonely in Grand Rapids before she came. He had been a little foolish, but was sorry for it. He was perfectly respectful and charming and nice. Grand Rapids might worry if it liked! Why shouldn't she listen to good music for an hour or so? *Pourquoi pas?* . . .

She knew why not when Henri Vauban dropped his bow

and went down on his knees before her and caught hold of her hands.

"Chère madame! . . . Sylvia . . Je t'aime! . . . Depuis le premier moment—dans les usines—ce jour là, quand ta beauté m'a transfixé comme un rayon de soleil dans mon noir éxil. Je n'ai pensé, rêvé, désiré que toi! Ta grâce, ta beauté, ton sourire, ton esprit, me remplissent de desir et d'amour. Tu parles de la France, tu comprends tout-ce-qu'il y a de beauté dans ma patrie, tu comprends l'amour qui est français et pas américain! . . . Oma chérie, c'est de mon cœur que je t'implore de me donner un peu de pitié, un peu de toi-même! . . ."

He spoke passionate, foolish, burning words. He was hysterical with emotion, and his tears fell on her hands. He burnt her hands with kisses, until she flung him away from her, and stood up, ghost-white, and so angry that her voice was shrill when she commanded him to be silent.

What a fool she had been to come here! What a fool!

The boy was a neurotic. She had never guessed that. He spoke insane words about jealousy of her husband. He ridiculed the thought that she could love an American husband, or live with any happiness in Grand Rapids. He had seen her sadness, her despair. He had suffered because of her misery. He was going back to France. They would go together. He was her lover; he would make her happy. Their love would be more splendid than all this American wealth, so soulless, so deadening. They would live together in a little flat in Paris. He would worship her.

Mad words from a boy with madness in his eyes—hysterical with amorous passion and morbid melancholy.

He refused for a time to believe that Sylvia did not love him. He thought that she was afraid of conventions, afraid of poverty, afraid of her American husband. Then suddenly, when she spoke, very harshly, cold words of ridicule and anger, which left him with no illusion, the boy crumpled up and wept. It was pitiable . . .

Sylvia left him like that, not sorry for him, but blaming herself. She ought to have known. A lonely French boy in an American city, not speaking much of the language, hating

his life in the factory, hungry for France again. She had been too sympathetic, terrible indiscreet.

That night Edward came home late. She sat chatting with him before they went to bed. Once or twice she wondered whether she should say anything about that scene with Henri Vauban. Better not, perhaps.

Edward yawned, and she said "Tired?" and put her hand on his shoulder.

The telephone-bell rang in his study.

"Drat the telephone!" said Sylvia. "Can't they leave us alone after ten o'clock?"

"I'd better go," said Edward.

He strolled into the next room, and Sylvia heard his voice speaking into the receiver.

"Hullo? . . . Yes. Edward Hillier speaking. . . . The police headquarters? . . . What's that? A suicide? . . . Henri Vauban! . . . A letter to my wife? . . . I'll come round . . ."

Sylvia felt as though her heart had stopped. There was a singing note in her ears, and she felt faint and sick.

Edward came back from the next room. He was pale, and looked anxious.

"Sylvia," he said quietly, "young Vauban has shot himself. The police have found a letter to you. Rather a foolish letter, it seems. It will have to be read at the inquest. I'm terribly afraid you're going to be—worried."

He was worried himself when Sylvia fainted in his arms.

XXXV

GRAND RAPIDS was inclined to be hard on Mrs. Edward P. Hillier. The letter of that young Frenchman, written before his suicide, reproached her with having encouraged him to believe that she loved him.

"In France," he wrote, "there is only one interpretation of such kindness as you gave me. I was justified before God in thinking that my words of love did not displease you. I played from my soul to you and you listened with your beautiful smile. I spoke to you with my eyes, with all the passion in my heart, and you answered with gracious looks. You met me constantly, and were very kind. Your last visit seemed to me a proof that I had won you and that at last you would have the courage to leave that dull husband of yours who tires you so much. Now, after your cruelty, life means nothing to me. I cannot go back to France without you. Death is the best escape for a tortured soul.

"Accept, dear madame, this expression of my eternal devotion. . . ."

A mad and dreadful letter, only to be forgiven on the plea of madness. Yet there was no proof of that to Grand Rapids, when that letter, read at the inquest, was printed with frightful headlines in the local Press, and with portraits of Henri Vauban and Mrs. Edward Hillier, followed by interviews with Julia Trumbull Shibley and Leighton Dick, who spoke with touching sympathy about the amiable character, the intellectual brilliance, the masterly genius, both in art and music, of the young Frenchman who had been the chief designer in the Hillier works.

It was only two days ago that Henri Vauban was in my rooms," said Leighton Dick. "We were discussing the psychological effects of the war and its influence on the ideals

of Liberty. He was a young man of advanced views, but perfectly normal and in good spirits. Among my guests on that occasion was Mrs. Edward P. Hillier, junior, who semed very much interested in the character and conversation of Henri Vauban. They left together. I remember it was raining at the time. . . ."

Interviewed by the correspondent of the Grand Rapids *Evening Post,* Miss Julia Trumbull Shibley, the well-known novelist, gave some interesting revelations of the young Frenchman. Together with Mrs. Edward P. Hillier she had visited his rooms on more than one occasion, in order to enjoy his compositions on the violin. He played with a delicate and sensitive touch.

"Never," said Miss Julia Trumbull Shibley, "have I heard such exquisite combinations of spiritual harmony. They contained a message of love to all poor stricken hearts, to all suffering humanity, to all unhappy women, to the innocent souls of little children. My friend, Mrs. Edward P. Hillier, was much moved by this wonderful melody. Her eyes shone with excitement and joy. His French soul spoke to her English heart. . . . It is a most tragic event in the history of Grand Rapids."

Sylvia read these interviews with rage and anguish. They were the treachery of people she had believed to be her friends. She had had to give evidence at the inquest, and the court was crowded with the younger married set, and with many of those silver-haired men with whom she had dined in her father-in-law's house, and whom she had met so often at Mrs. Sturge's. They looked pained, and hurt, and scandalised. It was obvious, she thought, that they believed the worst about her. She would never be able to live in Grand Rapids after this. Life would be unendurable, with all that whispered scandal about her, all that coldness which she saw in the eyes of her husband's friends. Mrs. Sturge would never ask her to dinner again. She would be ostracised from the good set. She would take her place with Julia Trumbull Shibley on the outer edge of the residential section, with the rebels and the outcasts. Not that she would

ever speak to Julia again, or with Leighton Dick. Never! Never, as long as she lived.

Even Edward went about with a grave melancholy face, as though the earth had shattered about his feet and all his faith had been shaken. He had been wonderfully kind and loyal and loving all through the time of the inquest, and he had kept the interviewers at bay with threats of personal violence if they dared to worry her, and never once had he hinted by any word or look that he had the slightest suspicion about her relations with Henri Vauban. Over and over again he had assured her of his faith and love.

"That French boy was crazy," he said. "There's not a doubt about it. He was completely and absolutely bug-house"—by which he meant insane.

But on the evening after the inquest his self-control gave way, and he allowed himself one little speech which hurt her horribly.

"All this has been rather bad for our good name. It has dragged it into the dirt of that newspaper stuff. My poor old dad will turn in his grave. . . . Well, it's a lesson. Let's pick ourselves up and go ahead again. Grand Rapids will forget and forgive."

Sylvia answered with a bitterness which surprised herself.

"I don't want Grand Rapids to forget, and I don't ask it to forgive. Grand Rapids can go and drown itself as far as I'm concerned."

Her nerves were all on edge. She felt extremely unwell, strangely and alarmingly unwell. And in spite of all the kindness she had had in Grand Rapids, she hated the city and all its folk with a sense of injury and injustice.

She left Edward and went to her own room and locked the door, and would not open it when he knocked and pleaded. It was their first real quarrel, one-sided but serious. He had the Grand Rapids mind, she thought. Like the others, he blamed her. . . . She had dragged his name into the dirt! Very well, she would not sully his name much longer. . . .

Her mood lasted next day. She would not come down to breakfast, and turned her head away from Edward when he

came into her room before going to the factory, after she had crept out of bed and unlocked the door to let in one of the Swedish maids.

That morning she went to the post office and sent off a telegram to Platts' Farm, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. It was to Neville Lacey, and said:

"Meet me New York Monday or Tuesday. Plaza Hotel. Desperate.—SYLVIA."

She had determined to escape from Grand Rapids.

XXXVI

NEVILLE LACEY was at the tail end of a plough in a forty-acre field outside the town of Edmonton, Alberta, when he saw a boy called Huck—short for Huckleberry—though his real name was Jim, coming down from the house a mile away at the top of the southern slope. It was just before midday, when Neville would knock off work, water his horse, and trudge that mile uphill to sit down on a wooden bench with six other hired men, mostly Scots, to get outside a dish of soup, a plate of beans, a hunk of boiled bacon, some "French fried" potatoes, a triangle of suet pudding, and a cup of tea. He felt like it already. Also he wanted that pipe which he had left, like a fool, in his jacket. Yes, surely he had left it! He felt all over his blue linen shirt in case it had dropped inside, between his belt and trousers, or lurked inside the pockets in which he kept a wad of dollars, a 'baccy pouch, a small edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, the key of his box, two handkerchiefs, a pair of socks, and a photograph of Sylvia Fleming. . . . No! No chance of a smoke until after the midday meal! . . . What did that boy Huck want? He was signalling like a semaphore from the top of the hill, and shouting "Coo-ee!" with his hands to his mouth. Neville answered back with a shout that made his team of plough horses start as though he had lashed them.

"Cheerio!"

A nice lad, Huck. Always grinning, and, thought Neville, a great jester. He had come from the London slums and one of Dr. Barnardo's Homes, and was farmed out to his present boss who gave him a rough time, poor kid.

He shouted again, half-way down the slope, and waved something. It looked like a bit of paper. Neville could make out two words—"West-ern Uni-on!" So that was it. A Western Union cable. Perhaps from England. Well, he hoped his father hadn't pegged out, or anything like that.

He didn't want to be Lord Lacey yet awhile. It was rather humbug, anyhow—without a bean. And this was a good life, on the whole. Fresh air. Good grub. Horses, earth, sky, sweat, sleep. What more did a man want—except things he couldn't get?

"Hullo, Huck," said Neville, when the boy was within speaking range, "What have you got there? A love-letter?"

The boy grinned, and spoke the pure Cockney speech, pleasant to hear away in Alberta, where the accent was mostly Aberdeen.

"Chuck it! It's a blinking wire from the Western Union. I told yer 'arf a mile away! Gor' blimy, it ain't no catch to come all this way and then to 'op it back again in time for grub, I don't think."

"Well, hand it over, laddy."

Neville tore open the blue and white envelope with the Western Union heading. He read it twice, gravely, and then wiped some beads of sweat off his forehead, and put the telegram in his hip pocket.

"Right-oh! I'll be up as soon as I've seen to the horses. Don't run back too fast, kid, or you'll be sick over your soup."

"You 'aven't come into a fortune or anyfink, I s'pose?" asked the boy.

Neville answered vaguely.

"I don't quite know. . . . It's possible."

"Well, if you 'ave struck it lucky," said Huck, whose name was Jim, "don't you forget your old chum, James Jenkins. I'm fed up to the neck with this farming job, not 'arf I am."

Neville trudged up the hill after him. The words of the wire repeated themselves in his mind.

"Meet me New York Monday or Tuesday. Plaza Hotel. Desperate.—Sylvia."

Desperate! Why desperate? That was a pretty strong word to use. He thought about her last letter. She had been feeling homesick, but apart from that she wrote

happily enough. Edward was the best of husbands, always so good and sweet and patient. She liked the people of Grand Rapids. They were wonderfully kind, untiring in hospitality, and good as gold. Mrs. Sturge was rather a trial, but a nice old lady, if one kept one's sense of humour. She had kept hers!

Well, that sounded all right. Why desperate now? Why this sudden call to him? This meeting in New York? He remembered a promise he had made in London. She had made him promise: "If ever I want help, I'll send you an S.O.S. Will you come, Neville?" He had promised to go through fire and water if she needed him. Now the S.O.S. had come, and it was serious.

He was conscious of a sharp anxiety, and some secret hope. Some tremendously secret hope which made his pulses beat as he trudged uphill to his midday meal with the sun in his eyes.

He had some words that night with Mr. Mackintosh, his boss. It meant quitting his job, at a moment's notice. Well, he was sorry, but he had to go. It was a telegram that called him to New York on urgent business. . . .

He caught the train next morning, in respectable clothes, and took his box with him, and an old kit bag which he had used in the war. All the way on that long journey to New York he thought over that word "desperate," next to Sylvia's name. What had happened? Some domestic tragedy? Some frightful quarrel with her American husband? Some horrible calamity? Well, she wanted him. That was bad enough—or good enough—until he knew. Perhaps good enough. He was conscious again of that secret hope, disturbing, tempting, thrilling. Good God! If only he could hope—after all! . . .

At the reception desk of the Plaza Hotel a very bronzed young man, who was Neville Lacey, asked if there were any telegram or letter for him.

"No—sir!"

Could they tell him if Mrs. Edward P. Hillier happened to be staying in the hotel? Mrs. Edward P. Hiller, of Grand Rapids.

The reception clerk was very obliging. He had been studying a book on Hotel Management: "The Ideals of Service." He turned over his register.

"I guess Mrs. Edward P. Hillier hasn't booked a room yet. Likely she'll come to-morrow. There's a morning train by way of Detroit——"

Neville Lacey registered a room on the tenth floor, and it was before breakfast the next morning that the telephone rang.

"A night wire from Grand Rapids. Shall I sent it up?"

"For God's sake do," said Neville.

"Mebbe God has something to do with it—but you can't be shure!" said the chatty telephone clerk.

The telegram was from Sylvia.

"Not coming New York. Letter explains. Want to see you here.—Sylvia."

When the letter came it explained. Sylvia was going to have a baby. It might make a lot of difference. She had been rather mad. Her nerves were all wrong. There had been a fearful scandal about a French boy who had shot himself in a fit of insanity. She had hated everybody and everything. She had felt desperate and wanted to escape. Now all that was over with the prospect of a baby. It would be an American baby. . . .

"Oh, Neville, dear friend, forgive me for having sent you that S.O.S.! I know you will answer it. I know your loyalty and your love, and I'm sorry to have let you down. But when a woman is going to have a baby she loses her sense of humour sometimes and gets things wrong. Come to Grand Rapids and forgive me. Edward will be glad to have you, and I will rejoice. . . ."

Neville Lacey dropped the letter beside the telegram on the telephone stand. He stood with his head drooping and his long arms limp, for quite a time, motionless. Then he raised his head and laughed and said, "Good for Sylvia!"

He didn't go to Grand Rapids.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Fleming and Stephen came over in time for the christening of the babe, who was now Edward Hillier, junior. He was an astonishingly beautiful babe, according to the verdict of Grand Rapids as proclaimed by Mrs. Sturge. He was also another link in Anglo-American relations, as also announced by Mrs. Sturge at one of her evening receptions. For a time, indeed, he might have been called the leading citizen of Grand Rapids, so popular was he among the ladies of the younger married set and their middle-aged mothers. Only Stephen, who was staying in Grand Rapids before studying art in New York, ventured the opinion that the kid had the same uncertain nose as the mother who had produced him to an uncritical world.

Mrs. Fleming was not staying for more than three months. After that she was returning to England to marry Henry Carey, who had come into a little money from a preposterously ancient aunt. It would be a great adventure in her old age! Meanwhile Grand Rapids was making a fuss of her and she had fallen in love with America.

Grand Rapids was making a fuss of Sylvia as well as her mother. They forgot a little scandal which had rather worried them, and were anxious to let her know they had forgotten. They said it with flowers, and her room was like a corner of Kew Gardens at the height of its glory. They said it in a thousand little ways of kindness while she lay in bed with her babe in her arms, and afterwards when she drove through the residential section in an open car with Stephen on one side and Edward on the other, and the babe on the lap of the Swedish nurse. Mrs. Sturge gave the first dinner party in her honour, and the residential section was busy in sending invitations. Miss Julia Trumbull Shibley was unavoidably absent owing to an engagement with Mr. Leighton Dick who was editing a newspaper in Omaha, a thousand miles further west.

It was a few nights before the departure of Mrs. Fleming that Edward asked an exciting question.

"Sylvia, how about that tour in Europe? We could leave the babe with his nurse, and have a good time with your

mother. Stephen can come with us. Paris! Rome! Florence!—Naples! old Europe!"

Sylvia listened to him patiently, with a smile of amusement. Leave the babe to the Swedish nurse! What an idea!

"I'm staying in Grand Rapids," said Sylvia.

THE END